Bite Your Tongue by bloodandhoney

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They hate each other...but they sleep less than fifteen feet from the other.

sometimes less.

(College AU)

1. Boots & Boobs

Author's Note:

jane's party outfit: https://urstyle.com/styles/1832007
song mike plays: saint by blood orange

Mike W. // August 22nd // 9:30 am

I can't stand Jane Eleanor Hopper.

From her short, frizzy hair to the combat boots she wears no matter *how* hot it gets outside. Her front teeth are a bit too big and a bit too far apart. She's constantly covered in bruises from bumping into things. I could go on.

Beyond her looks, she's got a superiority complex that's deserving a prescription. Never gives up the chance to correct you if you're wrong, even if it's just a little bit. Remember that scene in Harry Potter? ' *It's leviOsa, not levioSA* '. That's every moment of every day around her.

"Black is the *absence* of all color Mike. Little would you know but white is actually the presence of all them. Take physics ever?"

"Fahrenheit is the proper way to measure weather temperature because it is *human's* body temp based, not melting point based like Celsius is. I'm sorry but are you not human?"

"Women actually have better circulation than men because our gonads are inside our body. Yours are outside, exposed to any threats, and a sorry *excuse* for genitals."

Every day. Always with her light brown eyes boring into your existence, judging you like a slide under a microscope. Who knew someone who still looked twelve and barely topped off at five-foot-three could make you feel so small.

If she isn't correcting you or being sarcastic, she's sitting quietly; minding her own business until she can get a chance to get into

yours. Which is her one good attribute, it makes her really easy to ignore majority of the time.

Until she leaves those stinky combat boots right by the front door of your shared apartment.

“Hopper!” I yelled, holding the boots with a pair of tongs and a towel...to protect the *tongs*.

I went up to her bedroom door, which was on the opposite side of the apartment from mine. That was a purposeful decision on both of our parts. Even though it seemed we were always knocking down each others door for *some* reason.

Her door was locked, as per usual. There’s a lock on the inside and outside of each bedroom door (benefits of living on campus in a psuedo-dorm), and she keeps it locked whether or not she’s there.

But she’s here.

I banged on her door with my free hand, “Hopper!” No answer, but I could hear a slight rustle from inside the room. “Hopper I can hear you. Get out here.”

A sound of protest, then stomping towards the door. I stepped back from the door as she swung it open, so fast it blew both of our hair. “Can you keep your animal wailings to yourself Wheeler? Some of us are trying to sleep.”

My eyes scanned her; grey shorts, t-shirt too big for her that said ‘terminally chill’, and hair half up in a bun. I scoffed, “you could use the beauty sleep.” She rolled her eyes and attempted to close the door, but I held it open. I raised the tongs and boots up to her face, even she recoiled. “Recognize these dead animals you call shoes? They were in the foyer.”

“You mean next to the front door?”

“The foyer.”

“We live in a four bedroom apartment on campus with a shared living space no bigger than one of the bedrooms, I don’t think the

area between our front door and kitchen constitutes as a *foyer* Mister *Rockefeller* ."

There she goes again. I rolled my eyes and shook my head, "nonetheless...these were by our front door."

She shrugged. "And? You guys leave your shoes by the front door all the time."

"*Our* shoes don't smell like someone vomited in them three weeks ago."

Immediately she groaned and rolled her own eyes. "Don't be dramatic."

"I'm not! Smell 'em." I pushed the pair of shoes even closer to her face.

Her nose pinched, but she tried to hide it. "Well if you absolutely loathe it then put them on the balcony."

"*You* put them on the balcony! These aren't *my* stinky shoes!"

"Well *I'm* not the one who has a problem with it."

"Anyone who walks into the apartment and has a *nose* has a problem with it!"

"Holy fuck, *I'll* put them outside you bickering children." Dustin yelled at the top of his lungs as he came out of his room and grabbed the shoes. Mumbling to himself the whole way there, he quickly went to the balcony and stomped back to his room. Before he shut his door he turned to the two of us and yelled, " *some* of us have to live here too and don't wanna hear you tom and jerry all day!"

We turned to each other. I scanned her again, her jaw was clenched. Her right leg was pointed outward, and I noticed a bruise on the inside of her thigh. Dark and very obvious on her pale leg.

"Any other complaints you wanna submit?" She asked, her head shaking in anger. Eyes boring into me in that way she does.

“Yeah, answer your door when someone knocks.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” With a *click* and another gust of wind, the door was shut in my face. Not nearly as hard as I was expecting.

Mike W. // August 31st // 10:01 pm

It all started back when we were in kindergarten.

Jane’s dad, Chief Jim Hopper, had moved back to Hawkin, Indiana from New York after his divorce, his young, unheard-of daughter in tow. He moved down the street from Joyce Byers and her two sons: Jonathan and Will. From what I hear, they used to date in high school apparently, so within a couple of years they were married. It kind of felt like they more or less just picked up where they left off.

Jim and Jane went from living down the street to living all together, and Will calling Jane his little sister. Easy as that.

We were only like six, so we didn’t really mind that Jane was a girl, we were just happy to have another person to play tag with (which is terribly boring if there’s just two of you). Lucas didn’t come around until second grade, and Dustin in fourth, so it was just us for a little while. At one point, I was just as close to Jane as any of the rest of the guys. Maybe even closer. She laughed at all my jokes, we did our homework together, she showed me movies, I showed her music. But I remember how we always sat next to each other for some reason, like instinct or something.

It’s hard to say what exactly changed everything. One minute we were in jr. high and everyone assumed we were dating because of how much we were around each other. Then we were in high school, dating different people, and just fucking *fighting* all the time.

Whether I’ll admit it or not, I do miss when we could just *be around* each other and not bicker. Sometimes it makes it difficult to hang out with everyone. Hence why Lucas and I were waiting outside our first college party for the girls to show up, cause Hopper and I just *can’t* share a car ride together these days. Plus girls take eighty percent

longer to get ready, according to my calculating (I'd know, being a computer science major and all)

We heard a loud scream from behind us, so we turned around to see a naked guy with our school mascot's uniform head on, running across the yard with his fists in the air. He ran and screamed until he ran straight into someone's car, wiping out dramatically. We'd react more appropriately, but that wasn't even the craziest thing we'd seen that night thus far. People were drinking like it was the end of the *world* . Within fifteen minutes of being there I saw a guy in a tub having beer dumped on him, both washing himself and drinking the beer at the same time. It was almost an hour in and now I was just waiting for someone to shoot a flare gun at someone or something.

I laughed "Toto...I don't think we're in Indiana anymore."

Lucas laughed while shaking his head, "you got that right."

Coming as nerds from a small town, none of the parties we went to during our high school career (which weren't many) was anything close to this. Sure there was a bit of puking and kamikaze behavior, but the worst thing I had ever seen someone do at one of those parties was hang someone by their shirt on the chandelier.

I walked into this party to the chandelier already on the floor in front of the front door. That was at nine. It was now ten and people were on the roof.

"If this is the first party of the year, how do they act on the last?"

"If they live until then," Lucas looked around, "I think I can spot at least three cases of alcohol poisoning just from here."

It was something I doubted he could just *spot* (even while being a straight A med student), but I still raised my red cup into the air, "To college life."

He mimicked my movements, "To the education our parents are paying out the ass for." We both laughed as our cups did their plastic 'clonk' as they met each other.

It was a nice school, or it was supposed to be. Chicago University; the

furthest school we could choose that our parents would approve of. It wasn't even a full day's drive to get back home, but it was still so much more than we expected. We all figured we'd just go to the nearby community college and resign ourselves to our eternal sentence to Hawkins, Indiana. But all of us ended up at least getting partial scholarships to go here, so we all got lucky enough to keep the party together.

"When do you think the girls will get here?" I checked my watch, "We've been waiting out here almost twenty minutes."

"You don't have to wait with me. I just know that if I don't wait out here for Max she'll eventually find me and get mad at me for not doing so." He put a finger on his temple, "Improvise, adapt, overcome."

I laughed and took a sip from my own drink, hearing another scream, albeit one that's more familiar. We both turned again to see Dustin stumbling towards us, front of his shirt all wet.

"What are you guys doing out here? The party is in there!"

Lucas yelled "Waiting on the girls. Max said she should be here soon."

"So-the-fuck-what," Dustin slurred as he approached us, putting one hand on each of us, "tell Max to come find ya when she gets here."

"I listen to my girlfriend when she asks things of me. Hence why I'm the only one with a girlfriend."

Dustin burped, it smelt like beer and and chips. Lucas and I both recoiled but Dustin kept us in his grasp. "You deserved that. Steve, Mike, Will, and I choose to be single so we can get with *any* lady *any* time we want." I cringed at Dustin's words. *Don't involve me in this.*

Lucas scoffed. "Because a girlfriend is the only thing that would hold you back."

"It is!" Dustin bellowed. "We're in college now. No girl here has even heard of the nickname 'toothless'. Believe me boys...college is a game of chess; the girls are the pawns...and I'm the king."

“You have no idea how chess works at all do you?”

“No, but you get my point.”

“Steve’s here?” I tried to change the subject, as obviously fun as it was.

Dustin nodded “Of course he is, how else do you think we got invited? By our own merit?”

I wanted to bring up how he was just saying how he was ‘the king’ or whatever, but I let it slide. I had totally forgotten Steve was in a fraternity here on campus. We'd known each other for over five years now, so he was definitely no stranger. But when we hung out, we mostly just jammed or talked about random shit. Although I could always count on Steve to give me very straightforward advice, Dustin was our only *real* link, being his practical little brother.

All three of us were in a band, one that I was quite proud of myself. We called ourselves ‘Danny’s Not Here’ after what Danny says in *The Shining* . Well...more like *I* did and the reference went over their heads completely (until just recently). I’m pretty sure they thought it was something deep and insightful, but in reality I just always remembered that line from the movie, haunting my childhood from the moment Jane made me watch it when we were like ten. If I was deep and insightful we would at least have songs with lyrics.

Now, we play a good show. We always do. Dustin was on the drums, I played the bass, and Steve was our frontman; playing the guitar and singing. But so far, the only songs we do with lyrics are covers (Wheezer, Radiohead, etc). I had planned on writing songs for us to sing and perform, but I wasn’t known for being a wordsmith by any means. I had no idea how to ‘articulate my feelings into words’...or at least that’s what my ex Heather said. *Or was it Kelsey?* I don’t know. The fact that I can't remember is disappointing to me too.

Both Lucas and I were about to say something in rebuttal, but before we could, Dustin’s jaw went slack. He was staring off at something, so we turned to see what. Instinctually, when I saw what he was looking at, I said a simple…

“Wow.”

Jane H. // August 31st // 9:45 pm

I hated nearly everything about Mike Wheeler.

The only thing I didn’t hate being that he knew when to shut up. A great attribute for someone as annoying as him to have.

He was your typical tall, lanky nerd who thinks he’s better than everyone else because he’s good at math and is in a band...if you could even call it that. It’s just Mike, Dustin, and Steve Harrington (who I may or may not be deeply in love with). I still don’t know how they convinced Steve, Hawkins High heartthrob, to be in their silly little band. Dustin probably guilted his older mentor to join; he can be a very persuasive person when he wants to be.

I’ve never even heard them play but the fact that the only places they’ve played in have all been garages, says everything.

So far living with him has been tolerable at best...and it’s only a few weeks in. He’s such a neat freak and takes any opportunity to call me out for something minor.

“Hopper! You left ur tampons on the kitchen counter”

“Hopper! Aren’t these *your* dishes in the sink?”

“Hopper! It’s your turn to take out the trash”

In all the time I’ve lived with Jim and Joyce, neither have ever mom’ed me this hard. I wouldn’t dare step into Wheeler’s room; I bet he makes you put germ-x on your hands and wipe your feet off on a door mat.

Wheeler. Hopper. Our little nicknames for each other. Everyone I know personally calls me El, friends and such. Wheeler used to call me that. Then in the midst of us fighting everyday during the first year of high school, he started to referring me to Hopper. It was a bit jarring at first, and it felt very much like a bite at my self esteem for

some reason, but I was just glad he wasn't trying to call me Jane to my face, which is what anyone who doesn't really matter to me calls me.

"So he *does* matter to you." Max asserted. I had been trying to explain the whole *nickname* thing fully.

I side-eyed her heavily from the passenger seat, "He's been in my life for over a decade. It kind of just happens."

"Hmm….sure." Max tutted, tapping the steering wheel.

Max was driving us to our first college party. I told her I'd just prefer to take an uber, but Max wouldn't have it; she likes being able to leave whenever she pleases. She's one half of a long term couple so I'm sure she doesn't have much reason or need to stay late at a frat party. Technically, I really shouldn't stay late either; I have a test tomorrow and I can't hold my alcohol for shit, but Max convinced me to go (always the little redheaded devil on my shoulder).

"You can't make me be the *only* girl in the group all the time." She whined, while rifling through my closet (she didn't even end up using any of my clothes, instead opting for a dress she had brought for me, like she knew she'd loathe *everything* I had).

But she had a point, it can be a bit hard to be the only girl in a group of boys. I consider both Max and I pretty tomboyish girls by most standard, but even we like to have *some* girl talk. We both liked stupid romance books and tried to remain somewhat in style. What little feminine wiles we have seems to overwhelm the boys quite easily. Even my brother, Will, tended to turn red as a tomato when confronted with the most mild of female topics.

Except for Wheeler. He was raised in a house full of girls, sandwiched as the middle sibling between two very girly sisters. His first reaction to me starting my period for the first time at his place was for him to tell me where his sister Nancy hid her tampons. You can blame his Mom and sister Nancy for his 'girly' tendencies, like ultra-cleanliness and sense of style.

Speaking of, I usually don't feel so girly. It was a short dress with

spaghetti straps when I was used to wearing nothing but denim and loose clothes.

“This is so revealing.” I mumbled, pulling up the front of the dress and feeling weird about my bare-ass shoulders.

Max rolled her eyes. “You’re eighteen El, I think it’s about time to let the world know you have boobs.” I blushed, “it’s also hot and humid outside. I don’t know why you’d wanna wear any more than that. I still think it’s ridiculous how much you wear those boots.”

I tilted my leg to look at my feet, seeing my oh-so-familiar combat boots I wore every season without fail. Doc Martens. Absolute classics. “They’re my boots.”

“I know Ellie Bellie,” Max patronized, taking advantage of her nickname privledges

The GPS said we were almost there, and we could definitely tell. Cars were lined up and down the street, and Max immediately groaned. I pulled out Max’s phone and texted Lucas, knowing that was the quickest way to get a reply from any of the boys. I told him we were parking, and almost immediately he sent a reply:

Stalker <3: okay babe. Mike and I are outside.

I immediately rolled my eyes and let out a disgusted groan.

“What?” Max asked.

“He’s outside…with *Mike*.”

“You were gonna see him *sometime* tonight. I think you keep forgetting that you live with him or something.” I rolled my eyes. At that moment, a car was just pulling out of their space on the right side of the street. Max quickly pulled into the open spot, beating a truck. He honked while Max just gathered all her stuff together. She exited the car and walked around to my side, man continuing with the blares of his horn, finally driving off as soon as she opened my door.

I swung my purse on as I got out of the vehicle. Max closed my door

and locked the car, acting as if nothing had happened. “You give me anxiety Maxine.”

“Weird. I wasn’t expecting a call from my Mom.” She said without skipping a beat.

I grabbed her hand and walked closer to her. “We nag cause we love.”

We walked arm-in-arm, her heels clicking on the sidewalk. “Speaking of nagging; let’s try to not have a repeat of Kelsey Foxworthy’s Halloween party? Junior year? I know how you get when you're not the DD.”

“Ugh,” I grunted, letting go of her hand and throwing my head back. “Why must you bring that up?”

Kelsey Foxworthy was Wheeler’s ex girlfriend from Junior year. Probably second on the ‘Mike’s Worst Girlfriend’s’ list...which included *all* of them. She was uptight, airheaded, and as snooty as they came. I could tell she absolutely abhorred sitting and being *seen* with us at lunch. As if just because we were in AV club and actually read books we were some sort of inferior creatures. So I was rude to her yeah...but her behavior called for it.

I could’ve been ruder. Always.

“I wasn’t *that* bad…”

“You got fake blood all over Kelsey’s furniture-”

“They were *leather* couches...”

“Puked in her bathtub-”

“Someone was taking the toilet!”

“And chased her around the house with a chainsaw.”

We both paused our walking to meet eyes. “It was rubber. It wouldn’t have hurt her.” Max rolled her eyes and started walking again. “It was a halloween party! I dressed up as Leatherface! If she knew

anything about movies she would've understood the reference."

"I don't think her not knowing who Leatherface is was the problem." I held back a retort, pressing my lips together. "I'm surprised Mike wasn't more mad at you than he was, especially after she broke up with him not two weeks later."

"Now *that* wasn't my fault..." I stated, not exactly a hundred percent about it.

Max nodded, "hmm...whatever helps you sleep at night Ellie Bellie."

The music was audible from our location, so we both quickened our pace towards it, interlocking arms again. I was able to make out the lyrics of 'In My Feelings' and smirked...should've figured frat boys would be into Drake. *Probably just picked the first party playlist on Spotify*.

We rounded the corner onto the street where the party was at, and it was just the second house down. We both spotted the boys standing out front amongst all the chaos. Lucas in his usual baseball tee and dark jeans. Mike wearing a tee shirt and black pants. Dustin in his baseball hat, jeans, and hoodie...each in the brightest colors.

"Either way...behave yourself Jane Eleanor Hopper. We all know you can't hold your alcohol for shit." Max tutted.

I was about to reply to Max when I heard: "Wow indeed Mike. El has boobs!" Dustin yelled loud enough for the both of us to hear over twenty feet away. Which earned him a punch from Mike.

Max laughed while I blushed, already for the second time tonight despite it just *starting* . We heard both Lucas and Mike chide him as we walked our way up the pavement driveway. Max broke away to hug Lucas, so I fiddled with my purse, suddenly feeling very *bare* again.

"Hey dorks," Max said, coming back to put her arm around me. "I'd like to introduce-" she gestured towards my chest, "El's boobs!"

Oh god. My arms immediately crossed over my chest while my face must've turned the *darkest* shade of red. "I hate you Maxine."

“Aw come on Ellie. You look cute.” Her fiery hair whipped as she turned towards the guys, “doesn’t she look cute gentlemen?”

Lucas and Dustin gave their forced-but-positive feedback while Mike took a sip of his drink.

Could've just let it go, but where would the fun be in that? I narrowed my eyes at him, “you don’t think I look cute Wheeler?” I asked mockingly.

His eyes scanned up and down my body until meeting my eyes again, the slightest smirk on his face. “I just feel bad for the guy who takes you home tonight and goes to take off those shoes,” he motioned towards my feet, “poor guy won’t know what hit him.”

My jaw clenched. *That fight was over a week ago.* “You look mighty fine too Wheeler,” I scanned him up and down like he did me, “I hope the girl you take home knows how to fold your clothes properly so they don’t wrinkle…*god forbid* right.”

“If you’re saying my clothes look clean and well-pressed then thank you.”

“I’m saying you’re an uptight, fucking-”

“Why is that a bad thi-”

“Not tonight!” Dustin interrupted, throwing his arm between the two of us. We both glared at each other; the air already on fire between us. “We’re going to get fucked up and party our asses off. I’m talking you are having *withdrawal* symptoms tomorrow fucked up-”

“I have a test tomorrow-”

“Don’t wanna hear it Hopper! The night is young and so are we!” He raised his cup and chanted. Immediately chugging the rest and yelling while he ran back into the house. We all promptly followed suit.

Mike W. // August 31st // 10:31 pm

“Tell me, El’s boobs, how does it feel to be out after being imprisoned for so long?” Dustin asked in a deep, very TV broadcaster voice. He was even pretending to hold a mic, going from pointing it towards his own mouth to Jane’s chest.

I rolled my eyes.

Jane put one hand on her chest, and the other on Dustin’s hand, covering the ‘top’ of the ‘mic’. “I hate you sometimes Dusty.” She still had a wide smile on her face.

Her hand stayed on top of Dustin’s. I was standing next to where she was sitting on the counter in the kitchen. It was the least crowded room in the entire house thus far, so we just decided to set up camp there for the time being. We made a lazy circle in the middle; half of the group using the granite counters as seats. Jane was actually just about my height from where she was sitting…it was odd. About as odd as Dustin chatting up Jane for the past near half hour, mostly about her chest nonetheless.

“Has college changed you Ellie? Are you now gonna skip around campus giving the men of Chicago University heart palpitations?”

I scoffed into my drink, but I doubt either of them heard.

Jane shook her head. “Nah. Probably just special occasions. Can’t have guys thinking that they can talk to me.”

“Of course.” Dustin stated. He was leaning on his arm next to Jane on the counter, awfully close.

My eyes automatically narrowed at him. I couldn’t tell if he was just being drunk Dustin or actually hitting on Jane. We’d all been friends so long, at this point, you’d think something like that would be out of question.

From the corner of my eye I saw Dustin pat Jane’s leg after telling her a joke.

“Hey Dustin? Didn’t you say Steve had a bottle of rum hidden for us?”

The both of them seemed a bit taken aback by my interruption. “Umm…yeah.”

“Well I think it’s about time for the first round of party shots dontcha think?” I didn’t think I was being rude, but Dustin was definitely looking at me like I was. Jane just leaned back against the cabinets.

His eyebrows furrowed together for a moment, then he stood up straight. “Yeah I guess so. I’ll go look for that bottle.” He walked away, disappearing out of view.

I took another sip of my drink, scanning my surroundings. Hopper sat next to me, muted as ever. Her legs started swinging back and forth, periodically hitting the cabinets below and making an empty sound. I can’t confirm this, but I was sure she was doing it to get on my nerves. I assumed that of almost everything Hopper did anyway.

I lowered my right arm until it was right under Jane’s kneecaps. My eyes met hers, “I know you’re probably not used being in public and all…but that’s rude.”

Again, she was at my height, so she was able to look directly into my eyes too. “Every couple minutes I have to hear some shrill girl-scream, but my feet bumping into some cabinets is what becomes your undoing.”

“Just because we’re in a loud area doesn’t mean you have to add to it.”

“You didn’t have to sit next to me,” she crossed her arms, “or ruin my conversation with Dustin.”

“You mean Dustin drunkenly talking to you about your boobs? Yeah I’m sure you were real keen on continuing that exchange.”

She pressed her lips together and shook her head, releasing her arms. She scratched her right leg, so high up that her dressed nudge up too; I saw the bruise on her thigh again. It was on it’s last leg (no pun intended), very yellow and barely noticeable. Jane being so pale probably being the only reason I could still see it. Although, it was higher than I remember…right next to the hem of her underwe-

“Do you need some mosquito repellant or something?” I cleared my throat and stood up completely.

Hopper must’ve noticed how high her dress had ridden up, cause immediately she pulled it down, still scratching over the material. “Yeah. These fuckers are eating me alive.”

“We’re indoors…”

“No shit sherlock,” her tone was curt but she had the beginnings of a grin. “No matter how safe I think I am. Those bloodsuckers always get me; Indoors, through clothes, everything. You remember when we went to the lake that one summer. With My Dad and-”

“Tippecanoe? Yes of course! For their honeymoon right?” She nodded. God, it felt like a whole lifetime ago. We were all in middle school; as attached as ever. Joyce and Jim never really got to have a normal ‘honeymoon’ per say. They were both parents of young children when they first got married, so it was kind of out of the question for them to do anything extravagant, at the time just settling for a night out on the town while all of us stayed at my place.

About five years pass, and they decided to take us all to the lake for their five year anniversary. Sure, it wasn’t the beach or Paris, but it was time away from home spent with family, so it was enough.

“Of course I remember. One of the best summers…” I momentarily got lost in a train of thought, but quickly dismissed it. “But yeah I do remember that. You looked like you had a rash all over your legs. It’s a miracle you didn’t get malaria.” I took a sip then peered down into my cup, seeing the ends of my orange punch. I still didn’t know exactly what was in it, but that isn’t exactly a rarity considering the context. Who actually ever knew what was in the punch they were drinking?

I swore I saw out of my peripherals that Jane opened her mouth, presumably to say something, but instead she slid off the counter. Her thighs making a small *squeak* against the smooth granite. She headed towards the big punch bowl on the middle of the island. I was about to ask her to get a cup for me too when someone entered the kitchen.

“*There* they are! My kiddos!” I looked up to see Steve Harrington holding the elusive bottle of rum in one hand. He immediately went to Dustin’s side and threw his arm over his younger counterparts shoulder. Steve was a couple inches taller than Dustin, clearing off at about six foot even. He was still a couple inches shorter than me but it never felt like it; between his hair, personality, and age he always felt *bigger* .

“Are you guys ready to get this party started?” Steve all but chanted. He sounded like a cheerleader. He was just talking to us (I think), but multiple other people outside our circle cheered along with him.

This was why I had wanted Steve as our frontman for Danny’s Not Here. He had everything a frontman needed: looks...charisma...talent. Anytime we played in public people seemed to really wanna listen to him. It’s something he’s always had. Luckily, it never got to his head (too much), and he has remained a pretty grounded, chill guy for the most part (can't say the same for his hair). But then again I mostly knew ‘bandmate’ Steve...maybe ‘fratboy’ Steve was a bit different.

“Nice place you got here Steve.” Will said politely while we all approached the island in the middle of the kitchen, Jane close behind him.

“Oh please it’s a shitshow right now. You should see it right after the maids leave. Feels like a resort.” Steve was pouring the shots into mini red solo cups.

At that, I just bit my lip and smiled.

“How often do you guys throw parties here?” Lucas asked.

Steve shrugged, finishing off the shots. “Whenever the occasion arises. Someone’s birthday. Classes are cancelled. Just when we feel like it.”

“Do the police ever come?” I asked, although it didn’t seem to faze Steve. “I mean, you can hear this party from down the street.”

“Most of the houses nearby are also fraternity or sorority houses. The rest of them are mostly students too so we just give them invites and

they're chill." He puts his arm back around Dustin and raises his shot glass. I'm pretty sure it has their frat signs on it (whatever the terms for those are), but I can't tell. "But let's not mind that. This is the beginning of your college years; some of the best years of your life. Let's toast to it."

"To good times." He says, and we all follow suit. Our glasses all *clink* and we take the shots. It doesn't affect most of us that much, just a couple grimaces. Jane, however, starts coughing a bit.

"Sorry." She chokes out. The crook of her wrist is over her mouth and her eyes seem to already be watering.

I instantly smirk as I say to her, "lightweight."

Still coughing, she turns towards me and flips me off. She goes to the sink and fills up a cup of water. Will and I both watching the entire time.

"Sorry about that Ellie. It's pretty strong stuff." He goes to the fridge, passing by Jane and patting her on the back. Steve opens the door to the fridge and reaches in. "Who all wants a beer?"

All of us raised our hand, except for Will and Jane. Steve got a handful of cans, they looked like modelo's, and started handing them out. I got one in my hand and it didn't seem too cold, as if someone had just popped them in the fridge not too long ago. But beggars can't be choosers, and warm beer is better than none. It was gonna taste better later anyway the drunker I got. Just had to power through until I got there.

Yet another Cardi B song started playing and I cringed mid gulp, just adding to the already there disgust. I mentally reminded myself to try to find the source later. I couldn't stomach warm beer *and* this tactless playlist. All of the music they had been playing had sounded like each other; just noisy and meaningless. At least at the parties we had back in Hawkins someone would play MGMT or Two Door Cinema Club or something with more substance.

"So what's the plan?" Lucas queried, interrupting my train of thought.

“Well I’ve gotta introduce Dustin to a couple of people. Gotta play a couple rounds of ‘have you met my friend Dustin?’ with some girls I know.” Dustin fist bumped Steve, completely eating it up. “But as for you guys: *me* casa eh *sue* casa,” I cringed at his pronunciation. *How mighty white of him.* “I’m sure there’s a circle smoking outside and upstairs and...everywhere. I don't know. Feel free to join! There’s punch bowls everywhere. And just about everyone I know from campus is here so house equals oyster. Explore away.” He talked like he was doing a sales pitch, but while drunk. It was amusing; only Steve Harrington could pull of such drunk behavior.

“What about the pool out back?” Jane pointed through the kitchen window. “Can we swim?”

“Of course. Swim to your heart's content. Just no water sex; it’s very unsanitary.”

I swore I saw a bit of color on Jane’s cheeks. “What if we didn’t bring our bathing suits? Do you have any extras or…?”

It was an innocent enough question, but it was too tempting to not make fun of her for it. Just as I was about to open my mouth with a retort, Steve turned towards Hopper and said, “who says you need a swimsuit?” Then winked at her.

The rest of the party didn’t really seem to hear, all caught in their own conversations, but both Jane and I did. Now I *definitely* saw color tint Hopper’s cheeks. She pressed her lips together in a tight smile, brushing her fingers through her hair. It was safe to say she had a very positive reaction to Steve’s comment.

I, however, just knitted my eyebrows together and felt a bit alarmed (to say the least). First Dustin doesn’t shut up about Jane’s boobs, then Steve basically gives her permission to strip in public? It just didn’t feel right; we had all been friends for years now. It was past that point for those sorts of things... *wasn’t it* ?

My mind was too deep in thought to notice Steve rounding up Dustin to, presumably, hook him up with sorority girls. I did see, however, Jane watching the both of them as they exited.

“Maybe you should take a picture.”

Honestly…I hadn’t meant to say that out loud. Picking on Jane was one thing, but I didn’t like outright embarrassing her. I don’t know if it was the alcohol already taking its effect on me or what. It seemed like no one had really heard my stupid comment…besides Hopper. She shot a fiery look in my direction, and if my face hadn’t already felt hot from the party and the shots, I’m sure it would have then.

“C’mon Will let’s go check out the rest of the house.” She grabbed onto his shirt more than him, and started leading him away. He didn’t put up any resistance; it was Will after all.

After they left, I noticed how even Max and Lucas had started making their way out into the crowd. I was left standing alone in front of the island, all of our used shot glasses scattered across the counter where they had been standing. I could tell which one was Hopper’s from the ring of lip gloss left on the edge. A certain feeling swept over me, but I pushed it away.

I raised my beer into the air. “To good times.” I said, bringing my beer back up to my mouth and taking a big swig.

Jane H. // September 1st // 12:07 am

I was supposed to be waking up in less than nine hours to go take a test I was already attempting to make up because of missing a class.

My Dad would be so disappointed if he saw me.

I dipped the ladle into the punch and fished out some blood orange liquid with a pineapple chunk. It was gonna be my third of the night…or the fourth. I wasn’t exactly trying to do math on the weekend.

Thus far I had spent most of the night hanging out with Will, alternating which corners we we stuck to like the wallflowers we were. It was still a good time; watching Max’s face turn as fiery as her hair from the alcohol coursing through her veins, Lucas singing out loud to all the songs that were playing, and Dustin hitting on just

about every girl he came across. He was having pretty good luck tonight, but it must help to have the exquisite Steve Harrington being your wingman.

I still couldn't get over Steve being here. Him calling me 'Ellie' like he used to. His hand on my back for the most fleeting of moments. Him winking at me after he said those words.

Who says you need a swimsuit?

Goosebumps rose on my skin. That was flirty right? It must've been. Or was that just the alcohol talking? I don't know. It was hard to say; I honestly barely knew the guy.

I hadn't seen him much since junior year; he was three years older than us and had been in college for a hot minute now. I'd spent nearly all my high school years getting all 'heart-eyes' anytime he got within a thirty feet vicinity of me. He was truthfully the only guy at Hawkins High I wanted to 'be with' (whatever that meant), but I could never really work up the guts to talk to him, me being just absolutely gutless when it came to things like that.

In fact, the closest I had ever gotten to a 'boyfriend' was that time in freshman year with Troy Peterson. I made out with him during my first ever high school party, and spent the subsequent couple months attempting to date him to no avail. Maybe my standards had been unrealistic; I had spent my adolescence pouring myself into love stories and cheesy romance movies (I'm looking at you The Notebook). Can't blame Troy for not building me my dream house. I kind of gave up after that; resigned to single life until either Steve Harrington or one of the guys from the books I read came up to me and professed his undying love.

A sigh escaped my lips as I saw Steve make a couple girls laugh. I might as well be invisible.

"What's with the long face Janie?" Will asked.

I narrowed my eyes at him, "I thought only Mom and Dad called me that."

“What can I say? It’s catching on.” Will took a sip of his punch. He had been babysitting the same drink for the past half hour. I guessed he was the guys D.D. “Still, what’s up?”

I made an exaggerated sad face. “Boys don’t like me.”

His eyebrows immediately furrowed. “Am I talking to the same girl who I’ve been pretending I’m dating so boys can *leave her alone* ?”

I side-eyed him. It was true. Unlike at parties in Hawkins, none of these boys knew I was a police chief's daughter and not to be trifled with. “That’s different.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Boys have *always* liked you sis. It’s been *you* who hasn’t liked the boys. Which I’m sure Hop is pretty happy about. *I’m* happy about.”

“Yeah...just not the boys *I* like.” I was being drunk and dramatic and I knew it, but Will was the only one who’d put up with it. So might as well.

“Ain’t that how it always goes?” Will asked, dubious as ever to my girlish fantasies. “Always want what you can’t have?”

As if on cue, the song changed from a Maroon 5 song I couldn’t quite place, to something starting off with some kind of horn. It sounded very jazz-like until it faded out to silence, then the person started singing. It sounded like a cool song, but definitely not something a fraternity brother would play at his first mixer. Almost instantly, I knew the culprit.

“Mike.”

He was so *pretentious* . This happened every party we went to; Mike thought his music was better than any music the owner of the house could be playing, so he always made it his mission to find the source and change it somehow. Such a music snob. The boy makes a band and thinks he’s the next Alex Turner or something.

Will looked up towards the speakers, as if hearing the music for the first time, and nodded. “Well I guess Mike has found the aux cord.” He laughed, “I haven’t seen him really this whole party. Have you?”

“No, but I think I’ll go find him. I think he’s trying to turn this party into something from a Sofia Coppola movie.”

“Am I supposed to understand that reference?”

I smiled and kissed his cheek, “I’ll be right back Billy boy.”

“No fair!” He called after me as I walked away. I knew he hated the nickname his Mom and brother called him.

The party was still very much in full swing, with no signs of ceasing anytime soon. Although the house itself looked like it could take a breather. No matter where I went, everything was sticky and reeked of sweat and sugar. I couldn’t imagine being the ones to clean this up tomorrow.

I may not have to clean, but I will definitely be hungover tomorrow. Might even puke. Who knows?

My Dad would be so *very* disappointed in me right now.

Growing up as the police chief’s daughter has its perks; people were afraid to fuck with me and let me keep to myself most of the time (which was my goal). As I got older, though, I realized that it also alienated me from stuff like being invited to parties or being asked out to prom. Everyone was afraid I’d snitch or something, even though I couldn’t think of a more secretive person than myself, but I guess that’s easy for me to say.

My phone in my hobo purse vibrated, so I took it out of the front pocket and checked the notification, it was from Max.

MadMax: Wanna take 1 last round of party shots before we bounce?

Ellie Bellie: When r u guys planning on leavin?

MadMax: Idk about u guys, but Lucas is drivin us home in like an hour. Ur free to join.

Ellie Bellie: I’m down. Text will I’ll meet u guys in the kitchen.

I huffed and looked around. I had already searched most of

downstairs to no avail. I followed the speakers all around each room, double-taking and sipping on my punch as I went. I didn't realize how tipsy I was until I tried walking a straight line without bumping into anything. Everyone was so very loud and everything, *everything* was moving; it felt like I was walking around on a merry-go-round.

The only place I hadn't looked was upstairs, so I let a sigh escape my lips before I grabbed onto the banister and ascended the stairs. I didn't even remember why I had initially started looking for Mike, but I was going up the stairs now...so might as well keep going. *I must've had a good reason.*

It was darker upstairs, and I was careful about what rooms I peeked into, not wanting to stumble upon a very naked couple having sex or something. I decided to do what was most logical at the moment.

"Mike!" I yelled. "Mike where are you?" I half sing-songed unintentionally.

I leaned up against the wall and closed my eyes. I could feel my heart beating everywhere on my body, and right now it sounded like it was beating along to the song that was playing.

Spreading all my love for you.

You never tell me all that you do.

I hummed along to the song I didn't know, hugging my chest. It was still so weird to feel my bare shoulders.

"Mike!" My voice cracked at the end and I started coughing. I didn't think I was yelling that loud but it was hard to hear over the music.

Suddenly, someone grabbed my arm and I quickly jerked away, falling down in the process with a loud thud. A very unattractive sound came out of my mouth as I rolled onto my back with my hand on my forehead. I probably both looked and sounded like I was in pain, but I was used to bumping into things. More or less I was just incapable of getting up.

"Jesus christ El, you still can't hold your alcohol for shit." I heard a familiar voice mumble while helping me up. "Are you okay?"

I groaned and protested, body both goo and rock at the same time. “I’m fine,” I mumbled, my head kind of lolling to the side, “have you seen Mike?”

My feet finally fit under me and I opened my eyes to not see Max or any other friendly face, but Mike himself. He still had his hands on my arms even though I was already leaning up against the wall.

“Oh so I’m Mike now?”

My eyebrows knitted together. “Wheeler I’ve been looking for you.”

“You mean yelling all over the house for me then passing out against a wall? Yeah you’re doing a real bang-up job.”

“I found you still.”

“No actually, *I* found *you* . What are you doing up here anyway?”

I pouted and shook him off, trying to appear more sober. “What are *you* doing up here Wheeler? Getting hot and heavy with some sorority chick? Should I excuse myself?”

He rolled his eyes, “I was just changing the music-”

“Yeah I heard,” I interrupted, “what’s it with you assuming you know better than everyone else?” I poked his chest with my pointer finger. He just stared at it with a confused look on his face.

Now his eyebrows knitted together, “*you’re* one to talk miss I-know-everything-and-you-don’t.”

“At least I don’t come into people’s house and change things about it without their permission.” I attempted to take another sip from my punch, but Wheeler’s hand stopped me. He took the drink out of my hand with ease. “Hey that’s mi-”

“Did you get this for yourself?” He pointed to the drink.

I rolled my eyes. “Yes. Of course I did. *God* you sound like Will.” I saw him eye the contents of the cup, about a third to half of it remained. “Drink it.”

He scrunched up his nose, “what?”

“Drink it. Obviously you need a drink if you’re up to lecture me.” The words all slurred together unintentionally. “Our friends are waiting to do shots with us downstairs. Just drink and let’s go downstairs and have a good time.”

“I thought you were mad at-”

Like the drunk woman I was, I put my fingers on his lips, shushing him. He looked even more confused about me doing this than me poking him. “Doesn’t matter. We’re here to have a good time right? Isn’t that what *Steve* said?” My hand dropped from his mouth.

His eyes met mine. He looked like he had something on the tip of his tongue, I swear. I hadn’t been this close to him in some time; I had forgotten just how dark his brown eyes were and how many freckles he had. I wanted to say something about it, but I didn’t. I just motioned to the drink and waited. Immediately, he put the cup to his mouth and drank it all, tilting his head almost all the way back in the process. I could see his adam’s apple bob as he did so.

When his eyes met mine again his upper lip had a little bit of beer foam on it. The next song had started. “Let’s go Hopper.”

Mike W. // September 1st // 8:21 am

I didn’t really remember much about last night beyond Hopper and I going downstairs to do shots again with the rest of our party. She had come upstairs to find me apparently, and I found her in the hallway with her hands on her shoulders looking like she was about to nod off.

But I did remember Max and her getting there, and Dustin making the biggest deal about her boobs, to my chagrin. Jane always dressed very modestly, so I’ll admit it was something that took me aback when I first saw her, but I wasn’t gonna be like Dustin and oogle over my friends breasts. Even though it was pretty amusing to see her turn red and not have a quick retort.

I remember hanging out upstairs alone, trying to think clearly. I wanted my band to work, and now that we all were in college...all *together* , it was possible. I was just being really angsty about it all.

I remember dancing. Specifically Jane. I had put on my own personal party playlist and she had seemed to like it. For the first time in years Jane and I were able to be around each other and not wanna rip each others heads off.

All it took was copious amounts of alcohol.

Then I remember kissing, or being kissed. I'm not quite sure; the whole memory seems like it's in a haze. Hands on a foggy glass or something. The kiss tasted sweet and minty. It could've been a dream.

I didn't remember anything besides that.

So when I woke up lying face to face next to Jane Eleanor Hopper in her bed, my immediate reaction was…

"Fuck."

Notes for the Chapter:

> So....hey lol
>
> My name is V and this is the first fic I've written for Stranger Things, and also the first fic I've written in probably years :o please leave a kudos or comment and tell me whatcha think!!
>
> If you wanna see more /content/ and stuff I have a whole tumblr for my fic writings (bloodxhoney.tumblr.com). You can see stuff I've maybe made for the fic, my update progress/ schedule, ask me questions, etc.
>
> -v

2. Pants & Pacts

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike and El's twisted version of 'The Morning After'

(also it's over 14k cause there's a lot and I didn't update in 5ever so u deserve it)

Notes for the Chapter:

el's outfit #1: https://urstyle.com/styles/1860184

el's outfit #2: https://urstyle.com/styles/1936693

Jane's song: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHHtkeM8o-A

Mike W. // September 1st // 8:21 am

We don't really talk about it, but Jane and I used to be best friends.

Back in elementary school, even into jr. high, I had spent most of my time with her. More than anyone else in the party. I knew her favorite color and the perfume she liked to wear (black and anything with coconut). She switched classes so we could have a more similar schedule. We'd text each other all the time, even in front of other people. I remember Lucas and Dustin getting so frustrated with us when we did that. "No fair!" They'd yell as we laughed and continue just texting nonsense to each other.

If you asked me, I'd say it was her fault we stopped being friends. High school came and all of a sudden Jane started acting super distant and weird. When I asked her to hang out, it became less and less often that she'd say yes. Her time with me was no longer guaranteed, she flaked on me all the time. Then we just stopped seeing each other outside of school entirely.

My sister just said it was probably 'teenage hormones' or something like that, and I wanted to believe her...but it just got worse.

She started getting mad at me for the smallest of things, correcting me and calling me names. She no longer sat next to me. I tried to ask her what was wrong, but she refused to tell me. Either changing the subject or just not replying at all. I didn't get my answer until much later.

"I don't like you anymore."

It was a simple statement. She said it for the first time out loud when I had cornered her in between classes right before school let out for the semester, begging her to tell me what was wrong. I was expecting anything but that. Sure she had been rude to me, even ignoring me completely, but we were friends. Best friends, I thought. I was speechless. I swear something in my chest popped. She just turned away and went to class...leaving me stung-stained and very confused.

I didn't start reciprocating her coarse behavior until after she started dating Troy Peterson. Then it felt like war. Dating the guy who teased most of us growing up...kissing him in *front* of me. It didn't last two months but I knew then how little she cared for how I felt anymore.

Ever since then it's just been fighting. In fact, when the prospect of Jane and I living together came up, I wanted to say no. Voted against it even (majority ruled obviously). Do whatever I could to avoid it. But if I stayed in the dorms I couldn't pick my roommate, and I was too broke to stay off on my own. Will had convinced me that it wouldn't be that bad.

I don't think he had *this* quite in mind.

Waking up to Jane's face mere inches away from mine put me in shock. I could make out the smudges of makeup on her face. I could see where her lips were chapped. I held my breath. We hadn't been this close since-

She made a face and cuddled her blanket a bit more, bringing her closer to me. Her eyes slitted open a little bit then closed again.

But just for a moment.

Almost immediately her eyes opened, wide as saucers, and she jerked

away from me so quickly she accidentally fell off the bed with a "Wha-" and *thump* .

Not exactly the reaction you'd want from a girl after waking up to your face.

She sat up on the floor. Her hair was all over the place and she looked nothing less than absolutely gobsmacked. For a second I thought her face was gonna get stuck that way, then she tilted her head and asked "what are you doing in my room?"

Not exactly what you want a girl to *say* after waking up next to you either.

"Well I *was* sleeping, but-"

"Seriously Wheeler. What's going on?" Her eyes went down to my legs, and they widened even further. "Why aren't you wearing any pants?" She looked so concerned. Didn't know how to take that.

Me being pantless wasn't having much of an affect on me. I was wearing loose boxers and still had my shirt on; she's seen more when we've gone swimming together for christs sake. "I don't know...I figured you would. I can't remember anything; I don't even remember leaving the party."

"Same." She looked off into the distance. "I just remember dancing and…." Her eyes got wide before she looked down. I heard her pat her lower body down and look up at me again. "Where's my underwear?"

More than anything right now I wanted to point out how at least *I* had my underwear on. Especially after her acting so surprised at me being in my boxers, but I don't think it was time to make jokes *just* yet.

Hopper stood up and started searching the room. I figured I should probably help her too. While she was searching the floors I looked around on the bed, and as soon as I sat up from where I was lying, I saw them. Champagne colored and very see through. I had been on top of them this whole time.

Well that's not good.

The sound of me clearing my throat got her attention as I held them out towards her, trying not to look her in the eyes. "Here."

I may have not seen her reaction, but I felt her nab them out of my hand quickly. I kept looking away until she came back into my line of vision. I had assumed she put them back on (or at least I hoped so) and she was standing in between me and the window with her hands on her hips. Now I got to see her face...and it just looked misshapen with worry.

"I swear I don't remember anything either. Same as you." I said, being as sincere as possible.

Hopper sighed. I could tell she was thinking because she was grinding her teeth like she always does. I wanted to comment how nasty of a habit that was, but the timing still didn't feel right. Nothing really felt *right* at the moment.

"I'm gonna text Will." She stated with resolute, promptly turning towards her desk in the corner that had her purse on it.

"Ya sure that's a good idea? Telling your brother that you woke up next to a guy you don't remember taking home? Is that your usual 'morning after' protocol?"

She gave me one of her heated looks, and suddenly we felt almost normal again. "First of all you're not just *some* guy. Second I don't have a protocol cause I don't *do* this type of stuff. And thirdly," she paused for a beat, presumably taking a breath in between lecturing me. "I'm calling him to see if he remembers how I got home. Will would never leave me at a party unless he knew I had a way of getting home. We can go from there."

Hopper resumed her task without skipping a beat. I rolled my eyes and got up.

My joints popped as I stretched next to her mattress. I walked over to the foot of her bed and sat down. In this moment of silence I truly felt how hungover I was; nauseous, headache, and a light sheen of sweat

across my forehead. All I wanted to do was lie in my bed and groan...but no, I had to stick around and see to the end of this, *whatever* it was.

Will answered El within a couple rings. I heard him say something, very melodic-like, into the phone. El turned down the volume before answering. “Yeah I’m doing fine. Just hungover, but speaking of last night; do you remember how I got home? I don’t remember and I was just wondering…” she trailed off.

Her back was still turned to me, but I could see a bit of her profile. Her eyebrows kept twitching with the words Will was saying, I couldn’t tell if it was good or bad.

“Oh okay….yeah nope. Don’t remember that at all.” She laughed, but it seemed a bit forced. “Well thanks for telling me. Again I was just wondering so...yeah. But I’ve got to go, I gotta-” Her sentence stopped dead in its tracks. Just from what I could view of her face she looked aghast, which said a lot considering we’ve both spent the first ten minutes of our mornings already in a state of shock.

She took the phone from her face momentarily and looked at the screen, and as quick as she had seen it; she dropped her phone onto the table. She started scurrying around her room, all while saying “shit shit shit” to herself. Hopper was bumping into things so much she started to resemble the ball in a pinball machine; she was way too clumsy for this rapid movement.

“What are you doing?” I asked as she bounced past me.

“I gotta make up a quiz by nine. The testing center is across the campus and it’s almost eight thirty.” She went to take her dress off and turned to me. “Can you turn around please?”

My eyebrows nearly met my hairline. “Seriously?”

She rolled her eyes and ran to the bathroom, shutting the door. Man she must be in a hurry if she was avoiding an argument with me, a.k.a. Her *favorite* person to bicker with. Honestly, she should be thanking me for waking her up in the first place. If it wasn’t for me, she’d be sleeping all day like she usually does. Everyday I get up

between eight to nine and get my day started with a full breakfast. Whereas some days I won't see Hopper come out of her room until past noon, and it's usually just to get a bagel or a toaster waffle. Not unlike some sort of gopher who only leaves it's hole to get food and bring back into its hole.

I stood up and started looking for my pants; I'm sure Jane wasn't gonna be too keen on letting me chill in her room for a bit. They were right next to her bedroom door, and I didn't quite know what to decipher from that. I pushed it to the back of my mind and started to slip them on. My equilibrium must've been off from the ongoings of this morning, so I tripped slightly and knocked into her desk. I don't know how she tolerates bumping into things so often; it fucking *hurts* . A couple things knocked to the floor, but who wouldn't expect that; her desk was a clusterfuck of papers and random items (a pack of gum? A redbox movie? A dirty plate? How does she *live* like this).

A mixture between a groan and whine left my mouth involuntarily as I crouched to pick up the shit on the floor (shit being the correct word because I doubted anything of true value fell). There was a candy wrapper and a couple pieces of paper. I threw the candy wrapper away (which takes as much effort as leaving it on the desk mind you), and grabbed the papers. Most of them looked like notes from class, with little indiscernible doodles all over them. I got to the bottom pieces and saw they were a bit more organized and written a bit more legibly (Jane's handwriting being basically chicken scratch).

I would kill to be

Your clothes

Cling to your body

And hang from your bones

"Wow" I whispered, feeling dazed by those four lines written in blue, sparkly ink.

Before I could read any further, an irritated "hey!" broke my focus. I looked to the side and saw Hopper bounding towards me wearing new clothes and a very frustrated face. She snatched the papers out of

my hand and put them in her drawer carelessly.

“Sorry the papers just fell and-”

“Just because of *whatever* happened last night doesn’t mean you have a right to peek through my things you wastoid.”

I was going to spit an equally nasty response, but now that she was close I could see she was incredibly flustered. Hair half up, wearing loose jeans and a sleep shirt. This must’ve been a really stressful morning already and I wasn’t really making it any easier.

She stomped to the door and opened it, stepping to the side. “Can you leave my room so I can sprint across campus now?” Her eyes were avoiding mine, and now I really felt bad.

An idea popped into my head, and I regretted it before I even spoke it out loud. “Let me take you to the testing center.” I mumbled.

“What?”

I exhaled and walked towards her, resolute with my unfortunate decision. “Let me take you to the testing center.” She met my eyes and looked confused. “With my car.” I clarified.

She narrowed her eyes and tilted her head at me. “I gathered that much.”

Before she could say anything else to make me change my mind, I interrupted. “It’ll only take five minutes if you let me drive you so you can have more time to focus and actually do good on the test.” Her face softened. Instinctively, I looked away. “Do you want me to take you or not? Otherwise I got other shit I gotta do.”

A beat passed. “If you don’t mind.”

As soon as I heard her confirmation, I took the keys out of my pants and walked past her. “Well let’s go.”

Jane H. // September 1st // 9:12 am

Contrary to popular belief; I'm really not *that* big of a bitch.

Sure I'm sarcastic and scrupulous with whom I spend my time with, but I'm not mean to people just for shits and giggles….that's reserved for Mike. My rudeness towards him isn't unprompted either, as much as he'd like to convince you it is. I didn't just show up to school one day and decide I hated him, no, it was a *gradual* thing.

Mike used to be one of my favorite people, even more so than Will at some moments (not that I'll ever admit that). I'll never forget that time we snuck into the theatres to see our first rated R movie up on the big screen together.

My movie obsession was just beginning and I *had* to see this new psychological thriller coming out: Black Swan. I was ten years old and didn't really know what to expect, I just knew it looked like a good, *adult* movie. Mike had wanted to go see Kick Ass or something like that, but back then, Mike liked doing things for other people (can't say the same for modern day Mike Wheeler).

It wasn't that hard of a plan to execute. His mom had three kids to worry about (with little to no help from Mike's dad), one of them being a newborn Holly, so suffice it to say her attention was diverted often. All we had to do was ask to go see a different movie, and I'm sure the thought of having two less children to watch was just heavenly. Plus, The Hawkins Theatre didn't exactly have the strictest security (mostly high school students getting high out back); we just walked straight into the theatre.

Honestly, it's one of my favorite memories; sitting in one of the furthest back rows with Mike watching all those beautiful dance scenes, sharing a popcorn and soda (even though my face turned the deepest shade of red during the sex scene). I'm still mad we weren't able to get actual tickets for me to store in my ticket jar; I have every other movie I've seen in theatres in there except for that one.

Soon after was when the rumors of Mike and I dating started flying around. For awhile it really wasn't a big deal…who *cares* if everyone thinks we're dating? It wasn't gonna stop us from being each other's friends. We were happy doing whatever it was we were doing. What other people thought never really mattered much to us...until high

school.

When we became freshman at Hawkins High, all of a sudden, Wheeler wanted to make it *very* obvious to everyone we weren't dating. If I had a dollar for everytime I heard him recite to someone 'We're just friends', I wouldn't need FAFSA to pay for college. It didn't stop there though...He sat further away from me at lunch. He didn't keep a picture of us in his locker anymore. I was no longer allowed to borrow his hoodies like I'd always had since grade school. I didn't understand *any* of it. Not even three months into the school year, Wheeler started dating resident Queen Bee, Madison Hunting. Then I knew.

Wheeler became someone who cared about image. He wanted people to like him, even if that meant distancing himself from his best friend...just because she was the weird, quiet girl with cheap clothes. Now, he wanted to fit in with his beautiful, popular girlfriend. He joined track and wore name brand name shit. Hell, him and Maddie were fucking Homecoming *King and Queen* , while I was at home watching some early Halloween movie marathon in my fuzzy socks alone…a bowl of popcorn in my lap and a soda on my nightstand.

I didn't wanna be friends with someone like that.

But that wasn't exactly solely my decision. Wheeler still hung around us just as much as he used to (except he was usually accompanied by one of his bobbleheaded girlfriends), so I just had to find a way to deal with it. If Wheeler was gonna pull a three-sixty on me, I was gonna do the same to him. Gone with the wind was soft, pliable El. Now, I called him out for his shit and didn't care about hurting his feelings. It actually felt nice to finally tell him how I felt, right before Christmas Break…

"I don't like you anymore."

For a second I thought I'd say more. I definitely *thought* more when I was around him, and he had been asking me and asking me everyday, as if he had no fucking clue. It infuriated me to no extent, but that sentence seemed to fully encompass how I felt; everything had changed, and it was both as simple and as complicated as that.

Right after, though, I saw this look in his eyes that made me pause. His dark brown eyes...always one of my favorite aspects of him, were clouded with confusion. He looked like he had something to say, it was on the very tip of his tongue. But I didn't wanna hear it, whatever it was. Mike Wheeler was a fake person who used fake words and fake feelings to get what he wants. I didn't wanna be a part of it anymore, so I just walked away.

We hadn't really talked about *us* since.

But I had a feeling that was gonna change very soon.

"Creme frappe with a cranberry muffin!" I was snapped out of my deep train of thought. I was probably half nodding-off too due to the minimal sleep I got last night, hence the sugar boost.

I grabbed the items off the counter and immediately sunk my teeth into the muffin. It had been a rough morning to say the least, I think I deserve a reward. With my muffin in my mouth and frappe in hand, I sat down at one of the shady tables next to the campus coffee shop. I usually hate the outdoors and that glowing giant in the sky we call the sun, but I needed to take a break before I walked all the way back to the apartment.

My biology teacher had said he was gonna come by the testing center at nine in the morning today to come pick up tests, and he'd accept mine if I had it in by then (it was an email, but I could hear the judgement). By the skin of my unbrushed teeth, I got the test in at almost five minutes til nine. It was so close, I saw Mr. Rose walking in as I left.

I guess I should be thankful for Wheeler.

I groaned out loud at the thought and put my head between my hands, almost face down on the table. I honestly couldn't tell if I was hungover or just traumatized about what occurred this morning (probably both). The car ride honestly hadn't been *that* bad, Wheeler did have a really nice and neat car (seat covers and air fresheners galore), it was just more awkward silence than anything; neither of us felt like making any sarcastic quips at the moment, and that was all the conversation material we had for each other. But we weren't

even *close* to being 'over' with 'this' (whatever that means). I can't *not* talk about this, it's not even an option. I gotta know if Mike Wheeler is-

"El?"

A sort of yelp escaped my mouth as my head jerked up. "Wha?" I asked, peering in front of me for the source. My eyes squinted a bit, the sky was just so bright.

My jaw dropped as soon as I realized who it was.

"Were you sleeping?" Steve asked, his eyebrows furrowing.

It took me a second, but I collected myself the best I could; cleared my throat, pushed back my unkempt hair, and adjusted my posture. "No no….of course not." I smiled, making it a closed one after I remembered I also hadn't brushed my teeth yet.

Of *course* I'd run into Steve Harrington...today of all days. I still had my makeup on from last night and was wearing some thrift shop jeans; I looked just as bad as I felt.

"What were you doing with your head on the table then?"

I shrugged, making a stupid face. "Just *a bit* hungover."

He smiled, and it seemed brighter than the sky behind him. "Yeah you were at the party last night! Got a little bit crazy huh?"

My eyes widened as I smiled again, replaying the memory of waking up face-to-face with Mike Fucking Wheeler. "Oh you have *no* idea." I mentally kicked myself in the knee.

"Dustin did tell me you guys stayed pretty late last night. Honestly I don't remember much, my memory gets a bit dodgy around five or six shots."

"You must have a very hard working liver." I replied as I took a sip of my frappe, biting the straw in almost immediate regret. What a stupid thing to say.

He started rubbing his abdomen. “Hardest working liver on campus.” Steve was patting the area on his torso where his stomach and small intestine would be...not his liver, but I didn’t point it out. “But what are you up to El? I thought you were a night owl typically.”

Now, me being a terrible insomniac who stays up until all hours of the night isn’t exactly privy info; it’s basic knowledge by anyone who knows who I am. The dark circles are evident and I do not hide my hatred of the morning….but the fact that *Steve Harrington* knew it and brought it up made a bunch of little, stupid butterflies erupt in my belly.

A smirk appeared across my face. “Yeah I usually am but I was just making up a test. I’m about to go home and go back to sleep.” *If only.*

“Do you need a ride?”

My whole body went kind of slack. Normally, I would’ve been on *cloud fucking nine* right now, but there was two things: one, this was now the second time I had been offered a ride in less than a few hours and I was becoming more and more convinced I need to get a car already. And two, Steve giving me a ride meant I’d get home quicker...which just meant I’d have to see Wheeler sooner, and suffice it to say, I wasn’t exactly looking forward to that.

“No it’s fine Steve. I don’t want you to go out of your way.” It almost hurt me to say it. I was rejecting a chance to sit in a car alone with Steve Harrington. I blamed Mike Wheeler entirely.

“Come to think of it, I actually gotta talk to Mike about something anyway.” He shrugged, looking very pleased with himself. “Two birds one stone.”

I smiled outwardly, but internally I was muttering every swear word I knew. “Sure.”

He adjusted his collar and nodded to the left. “My car’s this way. Ya ready to go now or do you wanna finish your...cupcake?”

“It’s a muffin.” I tried to shrug off my nervousness, rolling my shoulders and curling my toes. Maybe drinking pure sugar wasn’t

such a good idea for an already anxiety-ridden morning. “And sure, unless you don’t mind me taking it in your car?”

“Nah I don’t mind. S’long as you don’t mind the graveyard of empty water bottles covering the floors of my Mazda.” Steve grinned.

I couldn’t tell if he was trying to be charming or not, he just makes everything seem so *effortless* . If this was him normally, I don’t know how I’d react if he was actually trying; cause right now he could probably ask me to feed him grapes while he lounged on a chaise and I probably would.

Not that I’d ever admit that.

I nodded and started gathering my stuff, which wasn’t much. I looked up and noticed he was already walking ahead, so I fastened my pace. As I stood up and tried to catch up, my foot caught on one of the legs of the table and I tripped, nearly wiping out on the concrete. Luckily, I am used to falling (it happens at least once a day) and was able to catch myself on my free hand and recover quickly. By the time he turned around to check on me, I was just a couple steps behind him, trying to cover up how out of breath I really was.

“So have you?” He asked.

“Hmm?” My heart was beating so fast. I really need to cut down on the sugar and put in more hours at the gym.

Steve seemed cool as a cucumber. “Have you listened to any of our bands music?”

Oh shit. I forgot, Steve was in a band with Mike. Usually I would’ve fawned over anything Steve created, but considering the other two-thirds of that band are my stupid guy friends who I used to make mud pies with really degrades my interest in any of their work. Plus, neither of them have ever offered to give me a listen (kind of momentarily offended about that).

But, I couldn’t let Steve know that I hadn’t listened to any of his music despite living with his other two bandmates (could that spell out ‘bitch’ any more clearly), so I said “Yeah! Of course.” Ya

know...like a *liar* .

Guilt instantly washed over me, but those feelings were wiped away as soon as I saw the beaming look on his face. “Really? What did ya think?”

I nodded while trying to muster up some broad terms I could use. “I liked it. It’s very... *individual* and...different from anything I’ve ever really heard before.” *Nice save.*

Looking at his profile, I could see that the corners of Steve’s eyes crinkled when he smiled. “Yeah I think so too. I honestly can’t think of the genre we fit perfectly into.” Again, I started to feel bad for lying, but I was already knee deep; no turning back now.

We got to his car, it looked like it was still brand spanking new (and it probably was, considering Steve’s parents). I didn’t know or care much about cars, but there was something about a guy having a nice ride that was just…. *cool* . Wheeler’s car momentarily popped into my mind; he had a similar car, but it was blue and very orderly inside. Plus his seats were fabric while Steve’s seemed to be leather.

I waited by the passenger door while he unlocked the vehicle. The familiar *click* of the electronic locks sounded and I opened the door, slipping into the sedan. Inside it smelled like leather and guy cologne, it was slightly intoxicating. He got into the car next to me and I realized the cologne smell was definitely coming from him.

“I think that’s a good thing,” I said. He momentarily paused, not starting the car. “You’re not like anyone else.” I shrugged and buckled up, trying to hide my blush and seem more confident than I actually was.

Again, I was ‘sort of’ lying through my teeth (is there a way to just kind of lie?), but my remorse died as quickly as it came when I saw Steve Harrington look at me like that. I was close enough to see his eyes were hazel and he had the slightest bit of stubble on his chin...and he wasn’t looking at me like I was some little friend of his little brother; it was closer to how you’d look at the A+ on the top of a paper. Whatever it was, it felt good.

“Thanks El. That means a lot.” He started the car. I sat back in the seat, feeling way too proud of myself. I wasn’t blushing anymore.

One point for Hopper.

Mike W. // September 1st // 9:27 am

This may sound hard to believe, but unlike most college students, I don’t stay up until all hours of the night normally. I naturally wake up everyday around eight, and all my classes start before ten, so usually by midnight I’m in bed trying to fall asleep. It’s a routine I’ve become accustomed to since I started high school. How else was I supposed to balance AP classes, clubs, swim teams, and friends?

Of course on the nights I hang out with my friends it’s different; obviously they don’t abide by the same sleep cycle as I (even Will usually gets up around ten). In those cases I usually just stay up as late as I can and hope for the best, which usually means me passing out on someone's couch before they finally tell me to go home. My inability to sleep in past nine (even when I’m hungover as hell) is a real bitch sometimes.

Especially when all I want to do is to go to sleep...instead of lying on my bed absolutely clueless on what the *hell* to do.

I currently had the pages containing Hopper’s poem in my hands, they crinkled with the air blowing from my ceiling fan. I hadn’t planned on taking them, truly, but when I got home and saw Hopper had left her door not only unlocked but wide open...I couldn’t resist. I thought of it the whole time I was driving her to the testing center.

I can find the things that I’ve left behind tonight

If I try

If I try

It was deeply emotional; just reading it felt almost too intimate. I never understood how people did that...lay their feelings out on the table like it was *normal* and *easy* . Use words to fully encompass how

you feel. Even with my longest, closest of friends I tend to freeze up when it comes to expressing my gratitude for them verbally. It's also a broken record I'm used to hearing from girlfriends in the past. I can count the amount of people I've said 'I love you' to on both hands, easy. Say what you will about me playing the bass, but anyone can learn how to do that with a few lessons. I'll concede...I *really* admired it.

Not that I'd ever admit that to Jane.

Which brings me to my *real* problem: How do I tell Hopper that I looked through her things and, after reading a very *personal* piece of writing, I've decided I'd like her help writing songs for my band? Mind you I'm also someone she really doesn't care for, so that just makes it a hundred times worse.

Man I really wish I was good with words...but then I wouldn't be in this mess now would I?

Knock Knock , the quick raps on my door interrupted my train of thought. "Hey Mike? Ya in there?" Will was the only one in the apartment who really knocked on people's doors. Dustin would try the door knob first and enter without permission (hence why most of us keep our doors locked). Both Jane and I never really left our rooms enough to knock on anyone's door anyway.

"Yeah gimme a sec." I sat up and put the poem on my desk under a binder, just to be safe. I went to the door and unlocked it, saying "come in" as I walked back to my bed.

Will entered my room, looking as tired as I felt. Did no one get any sleep last night? "Hey Mike, how ya feeling?"

"Better than I should. Did you just wake up?" I asked, not wanting to let him on the fact that I knew he'd been up because of his phone conversation with Jane.

He shook his head, putting his hands in his pockets. "Nah. I had to wake up this morning to take Dustin to his car before class." Will looked at my desk, seeming distracted. "I tried to check on you before I left but you weren't in your room."

I took a deep breath, trying to maintain composure. I hadn't thought about my cover story just yet; not a smart move on my part. I tried not to make a habit out of lying to my friends, especially Will, but some things are just better left unsaid. *This* is definitely one of those things.

"Oh yeah I didn't sleep here. Sorry for worrying ya."

A beat passed. "But you took El home."

"What?" I knew what he had said. I honest to god just didn't know how to reply. *Does he know?*

"You took El home last night. Before I left you said you'd make sure she got home safely." I opened my mouth, probably to lie, but I didn't get the chance. "Then when she called me this morning she told me she had gotten home but didn't remember how so I told her."

This was weird. This was *super* weird. Will was standing a couple feet in front of me while I was sitting on the edge of my bed, hunched over with my hands clasped together; it felt more like an interrogation than a friendly chat. Will wasn't usually like this...he only gets like this when it comes to his sister. I know this cause we've had similar 'talks' a couple times before (hated every one of them).

Another beat passed. Jane and I hadn't verbally confirmed, but it seemed to already be an unspoken agreement that no one needs to know about whatever happened last night.

"Well I-"

"Friends don't lie." He interrupted, and he had me at checkmate. *Damn* .

We always did that with each other...when one of us is bullshitting us just a bit too much. Sure we were allowed to have our secrets from each other, it happens, but there's always gotta be a line in the sand. I guess I had reached it.

So I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding, and sat back. "I stayed in Jane's room. Before you freak out," I state. I could already see the protective older brother energy emanating from him. "Neither

of us remember anything, so don't ask us what happened. We have no clue." I stared off, looking at my tv and seeing my reflection in it. My stomach growled angrily, cutting the silence, so I stood up and started walking out of the room. "And you can't tell anyone okay?"

Of course, Will followed me. I walked to the kitchen and starting making some toast. I didn't really feel like eating, but I knew I had to get something in there.

"How do you not know what happened? Were you both fully clothed or," He paused as I made a grimace. "Nevermind. Don't tell me." He sat on one of the bar stools, the kitchen counter sitting between us. He rubbed his face with both hands, and I understood the feeling.

"I am *never* leaving you with my sister again." He laughed a bit and smiled, and I already felt a lot better.

A smirk appeared on my face for the first time this morning. "Sounds like a deal to me."

I put the bread in the toaster and poured myself a glass of orange juice. We were right across from each other, eyes basically at the same level. I kept chewing on the corner of my mouth, a bad habit of mine.

"What are you gonna do?"

Will asked the question that was weighing very heavily on my mind, especially with the complications I added myself (nice one Wheeler). I mean...we live together for christs sake. We're ex best friends who hate each other who live together and now have done... *whatever* it is we did last night. I don't like complications and I don't like change, so right now I was pretty goddamn miserable with the projected turnouts of this. So I just told the truth.

"I have no idea."

Another moment of silence passed. I wasn't used to having such awkward conversations with my close friends, which is why I usually avoided convo's like this *entirely* .

"Does she know?"

The toast popped out of the toaster at that moment. I flinched at both of them. “No,” I snapped. *Why would he bring that up now?* I thought to myself as I took the toast out of the toaster and put it on the plate, turning towards the fridge.

“Maybe now would be a good time to-”

I shut the fridge door, just a bit too hard. “Nope.” I took my strawberry jelly and knife over to my toast, completely avoiding eye contact.

“I’m just saying it might-”

“Will,” I interrupted. “It’s not gonna happen.”

“What’s not gonna happen?” A random voice said from the foyer next to the kitchen.

My body went rigid and I faced my body towards the voice, my anxiety levels peaking. All the noise I had been making with my toast probably kept us from hearing the door unlock and open. Bottle of Welch’s jelly in one hand and butter knife in the other, I watched as both Steve Harrington and Jane Hopper come into my sight. I don’t know if there could be a *worse* combination of people to walk into this conversation right now.

And what were they doing together anyway? From what I knew, they hadn’t spoken since Steve graduated, and even before that she was basically invisible to him. At least last night could be somewhat blamed on Steve being somewhat inebriated, but now he’s sober. So... *what gives?*

Will just stared, barely keeping himself from his mouth falling open. He was never good with pressure. So I interjected, “Our laundry. We were supposed to go do our laundry together at The Mat, but I don’t know if I really feel up to it.”

Steve nodded. “Well the day’s still young kiddo. The Mat’s open twenty-four hours, plus it’s Saturday so there’ll be a lot of people there. Maybe you could get yourself a new girlfriend Wheeler.” He ruffled my hair, and usually I would get a bit irked by his patronizing

ways, but the conversation before was forgotten, and that was all I truly wanted. It was hard to get mad about this convo in comparison.

“Yeah maybe. I’ll think about it.” I said as I started spreading the jelly on my toast, feeling the relief spread through my fingertips.

“By the way, thanks for hanging up on me El.” Will broke the silence, also reminding me that Hopper was *here* already. I thought I had much more time to make a game plan. “I was worried sick.”

From my peripheral vision, I could see the two of them play hitting each other. “I can see you’re obviously torn up about my disappearance.” She laughed, “but I’m sorry about that. I totally forgot I had to make up a test today and I woke up late.”

“Think you did good?”

“It was in biology.”

“Hmm…’nuff said.”

It made me oddly happy to hear Will and Jane talking to each other normally. Both of them sounded fine considering the info they both were ‘plagued’ with at the moment. Maybe we could tidy this mess up.

A hand slapped onto my shoulder. I didn’t flinch; when ur around Steve Harrington you gotta expect some contact. He’s a very touchy-feely guy, always giving hugs and shit. Dustin was starting to pick up these habits too to my chagrin.

“Hey Mike. I’m going out for a smoke. Wanna bring your toast out and join me?” He waved at my plate like he was shoo’ing it away.

These words from just about any other person would sound at least a l *ittle bit* intimidating, but from Steve it was nothing less than an open invitation. You could say no, but you never really wanted to, it was Steve Harrington after all. No one was immune to his charm. “Yeah sure.”

“Awesome.” He patted my shoulder again, turning around and heading across the living room to the balcony. As he passed by Jane,

he grasped the crook of her elbow and barely leaned into her, saying something I couldn't quite hear. Just like last night, Jane's face reddened, then she nodded at him while smiling.

I followed close behind him, and as I passed Hopper I gave her a questioning look. A look I hope conveyed what was going on in my head: what the *fuck* dude?

She just shrugged (of course) and turned back towards Will. I made a mental note to pester her about that later.

Well...on top of all the other things I had to pester her about.

Jane H. // September 1st // 11:32 am

The sound of someone knocking on my door woke me up from my (unfortunately) short nap. I was lying face down on my purple bedspread, already drooling from the corner of my mouth. The sun was shining through the blinds and the person outside my door just kept knocking and yelling 'Hopper'.

Deja vu.

"I'm coming!" I groaned loudly.

I dragged myself off my bed and wiped the drool off the side of my mouth before opening the door. A certain Mike Wheeler (surprise, surprise) was standing on the other side, for once not looking like he wanted to murder me.

That counts as progress right?

"What." I said more as a statement than a question.

"We need to talk. Why'd you fall asleep?"

He motioned to enter and I stepped to the side, just our clothes brushing each other. "Because I got probably no sleep last night and you were talking to Steve for like *hours* ."

Wheeler sat on the edge of the bed, the exact place he had been not four hours ago. “More like an hour.”

“Still.”

I stood in front of him, arms akimbo. Our eyes met and every bit of the awkwardness of the situation settled in. The tension was palpable; it was almost too much to bear. I *hated* this. Even when we were going at each other's throats, we could at least look each other in the eye for christs sake.

“Do you remember anything?” He asked, breaking the silence.

“No…you?”

“Nope.”

I took a deep breath, and looked at the floor. “Do you think we…ya know?” I couldn’t even fucking say it.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. We both had some of our clothes off. Pretty damning evidence if you ask me.” I shifted my jaw from side to side, not wanting to agree or disagree. “Did you find a condom?”

“What?” I blurted.

“Did you find a-”

“No I knew what you said. I just…” I shook my head. “What condom?”

Wheeler looked at me like I was speaking a different language. “A used condom?” I tried not to show how uneasy his words were making me. “I always bring one with me-”

“Gross”

“-and I couldn’t find it in my pockets or anything.” He rolled his eyes at my interruption then looked up at me. We were being *very* serious right now and it felt *very* weird. I didn’t like thinking about these things or answering his questions. I was starting to miss him making fun of my hair and the way I dressed.

I was beyond fidgeting now, full on pacing around my bed while crossing and uncrossing my arms. “Maybe you lost it.”

“Maybe…” he trailed off, watching my pace around my room. “Or maybe we used it and it’s sitting in your waste bin.”

A mixture of a sigh and a whine left my mouth and I started biting my nails, a habit I thought I had broken when I was fifteen. I sat at my desk chair and checked the waste bin, quickly peering into it and seeing nothing but crumpled papers. I sat it down and started tapping my heel on the carpeted floor quickly, vibrating my entire body. My mind was going a hundred miles a minute, if only I knew where it was going.

Wheeler must’ve noticed my demeanor. “C’mon Hopper it isn’t that bad.” He lowered his voice and leaned forward a bit, getting a bit closer to me. I wanted to laugh at how guilty he sounded at the prospect of drunk fucking me if it wasn’t so sad. “If it happened *it happened* and we can just move on from it, no big deal. I won’t tell anyone or-”

“I’m a virgin.”

I don’t think I’ve ever heard a room go so quiet so quickly. Instantly, it was like you could hear a pin drop on my carpeted floor. I suddenly felt a lot better, like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders - but as soon as I looked at Wheeler - I realized my words had probably the exact opposite effect on him.

He looked frozen. His mouth was agape and his eyes, even while looking pointedly at me, seemed far away.

“Or I *was* .” I said, smiling and trying to give him an encouraging look, as if to say ‘hey it’s okay! Water under the bridge as they say!’

He didn’t seem encouraged.

As soon as I had woken up next to him, *this* had been on my mind. The question if I had actually lost my virginity to my sworn enemy Mike Wheeler. Hell, I had been debating about it in my head while I tried to remember the differences between RNA and DNA during my

bio test (I'm gonna take a wild guess that I didn't do so hot on it). I wasn't a particularly sentimental person, so I didn't care if I lost it to 'the love of my life' or whatever, but I had always wanted to at least lose it to someone who had *mattered* to me (whatever that means).

I should've just listened to Max when she told me the sleep with that one college guy junior year. I think I'd rather have 'hot beanie guy' as my deflower-er than Mike Wheeler...but we're a bit past that now.

"What about Troy?" He asked all of a sudden.

I gave him a disgusted look. "What *about* Troy?" Now *that* was a name I hadn't heard in awhile.

"I thought you lost it to him freshman year."

Suddenly, I was having a freshman flashback; It was four years ago and Troy Peterson, quarterback of our football team, was my first boyfriend. I was fourteen and so ridiculously insecure I would accept any validation people offered, even if it came from a boy who was like a water bottle...empty from the neck up. All those times he fumbled with my clothes in the back of his truck, always trying to get a bit further with me. I actually broke up with him because he just wouldn't stop bugging me about 'going all the way' (can't believe that's how we referred to it). No matter how many times I let him grope my boobs and let him push my head down to his lap, it just wasn't enough. That's just teenage boys for you I guess.

I shook my head in disgust "I *never* had sex with Troy."

"That's not what Troy told everyone."

"Well of course that's what *he* said. Why didn't you ask me?"

He put his head in his hands. "I don't know." Those three words blurred together in a sigh. He leaned back all the way on my bed, lying down with his legs dangling off. I got up and sat next to him, he still had his hands on his face. "This really complicates things."

My shoulders went slack first, then I just ended up completely lying down next to him, mirroring his position. Unlike him, though, my feet dangled pretty high above the ground while I'm pretty sure his

met the floor. I realized we were in the same places we were when we woke up together this morning.

“Do you wanna just forget about it? Pretend it never happened?” I asked, trying to sound as lighthearted as possible.

It was probably the easiest solution. I mean, what else could we really do? I was all up for ideas, but I’m pretty sure he was out of them too. We had gotten ourselves into quite the pickle to say the least.

He turned his head towards me and looked me in the eyes. “Is that what you want?” He didn’t meet my ‘lighthearted’ tone in any way. He was looking at me and spoke as if he was taking this *very* seriously (again... *very* weird). It made me uncomfortable, though I didn’t quite know why.

I sat up, and almost bounced off my bed. “Yeah sure. I mean, that’s what we’re good at right?” Mike sat up and I avoided eye contact. I knew it was out of line, really not the right time to say that...but it was weighing on my mind like a bag of lead. “And also neither of us is gonna ever know the truth so why not just be optimists and assume we didn’t.” I was kicking my legs out and swaying side to side, being as nonchalant as possible. He just sat up slowly and took in my appearance. I don’t know if I was trying to convince him or me that I didn’t care. Probably both.

“If that’s what you want El.” He said softly.

Oh no no no no . We can’t go back to first names *now* . That’s just too freakin’ weird. “Yep. I want that and for you to get out of my room. Just because of this little *shenanigan* doesn’t mean you can trespass on my land Wheeler.” I said pointedly, forcing a laugh.

He put his hands and his knees and stood up. I started towards the door, but he stopped me. “Wait,” I turned back towards him. “There’s something else we gotta talk about.”

Oh no no no NO . I thought first names was bad. What if he starts talking about the past? Asking questions and shit. I can’t do that right now. *Oh god oh god.*

I swallowed my fear and faced my body completely towards him. My fingers kept pulling on the belt loops of my pants. “What’s that?”

Honestly, I was expecting the worst. We were gonna hash out our entire history together right here right now, all because I wanted to get super wasted at my first college party. I knew it was gonna happen sooner or later, but I’m a more ‘later’ type of person. An ‘avoid your problems until they’re staring you directly in the eye’ person if you will.

And here was Wheeler….staring at me dead in the eyes with this oddly hopeful look. I braced myself by looking at the floor.

He pulled something out from his back pocket and held it out in front of me, I lightly flinched. Not because I thought he was gonna hit me, but I definitely wasn’t expecting *that* . “Here” he said, it was a folded piece of lined paper. I had no idea what it could be.

I tentatively took it from his hands, eyeing him suspiciously. Another quick flashback took the forefront of my mind for a split second: Mike and I passing notes in grade school, before we ever had phones.

Hundreds of possibilities ran through my head of what it could’ve been...but none of it prepared me for what I saw when I unfolded it.

“My poem?” I both stated and asked. My eyes raking over the piece of paper, reading it again though I had already done that hundreds of times on top of writing it.

I was so taken off guard by it that I almost forgot to get angry, but that only lasted a second. As soon as I realized the situation I was in, I flicked Wheeler hard on the nose.

“Ow!”

“That’s for taking my shit you asshole.” I stomped past him and put the poem back into my desk drawer, my face crimson from anger and embarrassment. He’s lucky he had almost a whole foot on me and is ‘important’ to me (though I couldn’t really remember why at the moment), otherwise I would’ve grabbed the taser my dad gave me and tased his ass for invading my privacy like that. I’m sure Dad

would've approved.

He turned to me, still holding his nose. "I'm sorry El really I-"

"Don't call me El. You don't get to call me El okay? Especially not now." My feet thumped against the floor as I bounded past him (apologies to our downstairs neighbors). I opened the door and stood next to it. "Get out."

There was a moment of hesitation; both of us eyeing each other. I was glaring daggers at him and he was looking at my like I shot Bambi's mom. He must've seen the resolute in my face, cause then Wheeler stuffed his hands into his pockets and left, looking very solemn. He paused right before he got to the door frame. "You're a great writer Jane." He said gingerly before he exited my room and I closed the door behind him, leaning up against it.

That's the first time Wheeler's complimented me in probably years...and it oddly hurt. It always hurt when he was nice to me, because it always gave me hope that he was Mike again. Hope is a dangerous thing sometimes...people don't usually tell you that. Hope can make a bad situation seem good; hope defies all instincts. Maybe that's why people call me a 'pessimist', but at least I was being safe...I was being *real* .

I don't know if it was from the lack of sleep, the whirlwind of emotions today, or the fact that I was probably about to start my period (probably the latter), but I started crying softly against my door. I slid to the ground and put my head on one of my knees, letting my tears drift down my face onto my legs. *You just need to get some sleep* , I thought to myself, *none of this matters.*

So I got up, rubbed my wet face with my hands to smudge the tears away, closed my blinds, then laid on my bed. I pulled up the covers and laid face down on the sheets, like I always did. My nose was still running, so I rubbed it on my sheets, noticing makeup stains from last night on my side.

Old makeup and snot... *bleh* . I better wash my sheets tomorrow.

Mike W. // September 2nd // 11:43 pm

Obviously...I had fucked up.

I should've seen it coming, on top of being terrible with words, I also seemed to have the worst timing. I've always just so happened to break up with a girl before a birthday or during finals or whatever (although I also think I just dated drama queens who wanted to make it sound worse than it actually was, but who's to say). Either I wait too long or I jump the gun, no in between.

I mean, Jane had basically just told me that she had lost her virginity to me unintentionally and was making it very obvious that she regretted it (something by the way she told me to pretend it never happened made me think that...I don't know. Just a stab in the dark). Then I just whip out her personal poem that I read *and* stole *and* was obviously written about someone she actually has feelings for...so I think I deserved the flick on the nose (no matter how much it hurt).

It's been a little over a day and I haven't heard anything else from her, not unlike how it was before. I wanted to give her more time, but when I saw her pack up her laundry and leave for The Mat, I knew I had to take advantage.

The Mat was the campus laundromat. I know it doesn't sound like anything special or cool, but it was. It had a mini arcade corner where you could play all the games you wanted for free and it had a little attached cafe that served coffee drinks named after laundry related things (my favorite was the ink stain). They just started serving little scones and and stuff that goes with coffee, so it's slowly becoming *the* place to hangout on campus.

Only in *Chicago* could a laundromat be cool.

Jane was packing up her laundry to go, and I could definitely tell because she was trying to stuff it all in this flimsy laundry bag that was quickly getting too big for her to carry. She usually went with Will, but I guess it couldn't wait.

So now was my chance.

Even though it was currently my bedtime, but I guess that could wait.

I also had laundry to do (wasn't lying that morning), so it wasn't that far-fetched of an idea. I also just so happened to have a car, which by the sights of Hopper struggling to stuff her entire bed set into a glorified tote bag, she was in desperate need of.

Maybe it was a bit dishonorable of me to use my ownership of a car to get her to get her to talk to me, but having her angry at me was just dreadful. I know that sounds weird, considering she's been perpetually ticked off at me for the past four years (and counting), but it wasn't like *this* . Sure we fought semi-often and slammed doors in each others faces, but now she's just ignoring my existence...which is *so* much worse.

And we're roommates...this couldn't be avoided for very long anyway (although I don't know if she knows or acknowledges that).

Hopper was attempting to drag her heavy bag out the door when I came out of my room, 'coincidentally' holding my own laundry basket. I saw her see me out of the corner of her eye, but she just continued to struggle with the bags. Although her movements seemed to have a bit more grit to them.

"Need any help?"

"No." She bit back.

She was blocking the foyer to the front door, so I stood directly behind her...just to be obnoxious. I watched her wrestle with the bag, flipping her hair out of her face with a flick of her head. I was gonna start tapping my foot, but I think that would've been just a bit excessive at the moment. I mean, she was already pretty damn pissed at me, and this was supposed to be my way of 'making up' (which I always managed to fuck up anyway), so it was probably best to lean on the side of safety.

But then the handle broke off the bag just as soon as she tried to sling it over her shoulder, and the bag spilled out onto the kitchen floor.

So I started laughing.

“Fuck.” Hop said angrily while she dropped to her knees and began trying to stuff her things back into the bag.

I stopped almost as quick as I had started (almost) and joined her. I wanted to make a joke. I *really* did. It was basically instinctual at this point to poke fun at Jane when things like this happened. The only thing that brought me solace was the thought of the many quips I’ll be able to say in the future, once we are (sort of) friends again. Not now though...now it was time to be a ‘friend’ I guess.

I mirrored her posture, setting my basket to the side and kneeling on the floor across from her. With a sigh, I started picking up some of her things and putting it into my basket.

“What the fuck-”

“We both have laundry to do and only *one* of us has a car,” I interrupted her, still picking up her things. “If you wanna drag your handle-less bag full of clothes a couple blocks then be my guest, I just figured you’d rather take a two minute car ride there and be able to actually wash and fold your laundry correctly.” I picked up a couple socks, directly avoiding the *very* familiar underwear on the floor.

“You’re supposed to fold your laundry *after* you do it?” She asked delicately.

My movements halted, and my eyes slowly raked up to hers. Hopper looked very confused, as if that was actually a serious question to her (which it *definitely* was). My neat freak brain malfunctioned. *Oh my god.* I asked myself internally for the second time in the past two days...how does she *live* like this? “You’re saying you never fold your clothes after you wash them…” I trailed off. She shook her head, “even the ones you put in your dresser?”

“No I just throw them in there.”

What kind of backwoods, hillbilly bull-

I cleared my throat as I pushed down my thoughts. I swear, my head started to develop a tiny headache thinking off all the wrinkles in all of her clothes. My right hand came up to rub my forehead lightly. I

know I was being dramatic, but if my mother taught me anything it was that order was everything; ‘tidy room tidy life’ to quote her exactly. I still organize my clothes by their color to this day and Jane hasn’t folded an item of clothing in years (if ever).

“Okay,” I said while grabbing onto the rest of the clothes and throwing ‘em into the basket. “Now I’m definitely taking you to The Mat. Someone’s gotta show you how to live.”

She scoffed. “I know how to *live* .”

“Not like a human. Closer to a farm animal I’d say.” I grabbed onto the basket and got up, she followed suit.

I always forget how short she was until we’re face to face like this. The very top of her head was in clear view; I could see where her middle part ended. “Tell me, how did it feel?” She asked me with skeptical eyes.

Any hint of a smile I might’ve had on my face vanished. *I thought she said she didn’t wanna talk about it?* I shifted my weight from foot to foot. “How did what feel?”

“How did it feel to become a robot with no traces of human emotion? Did it hurt?” Hop asked condescendingly, head shaking with sass. I would’ve laughed out of relief if that wouldn’t be completely out of context. I usually hated it when Hopper referred to me as a robot; I found it both unoriginal and ridiculous, but right now it felt *great* .

So I just looked down into the basket and nudged her with it. “Move sheep.”

“Don’t *herd* me Wheeler.” She said as she turned around and started towards the door anyway. “Isn’t it past your bedtime? I thought you had the sleep schedule of a seventy year old man.”

She opened the door and stepped to the side, locking it behind us. I noticed she had *at least* a hundred keychains (how could that fit in anyone’s pockets?) that jingled with every movement and a couple new bruises on her forearm. Why did everything about her have to be so *ridiculous* ?

“Not all of us have the luxury of sleeping until past noon everyday. *Some* of us have class and jobs to attend to.” I said as I waited by the concrete stairs. The entire hallway was lit with orange lights outside of everyone’s door. Luckily we only lived on the second floor, so there was only one flight of stairs we had to worry about.

Hopper hooked her keys onto her pants (how did they not weigh her pants down??) and swung her measly laundry bag over her shoulder. “You’re *eighteen* . The only reason anyone should be awake at that time is to puke up the alcohol they almost OD'd on last night.”

“Jim raised one *classy* lady.”

We started down the stairs, with me leading us down the stairs to my car. It was pitch black outside and I could hear all the bugs in the wooded area adjacent to our apartment buildings. I usually didn’t get to see this kind of night; the *deep* nighttime when all the nocturnal animals came out and all the traces of the day were gone. Not to mention I also wasn’t the ‘outdoors type’...dirt was *everywhere* out here. But I’ll admit, it was nice.

Jane had skipped ahead and was standing by my car with one of her hands on the passenger door handle, looking at me expectantly. This was the second time in two days I was gonna give Hopper a ride. I wonder if this was gonna become a normal thing. Maybe that wouldn’t be *all* bad.

“Any day now would be great Frogface.”

Nevermind.

“Now that’s just mean.” I said, walking up to my car and unlocking it with my key fob. “You don’t see me calling you *Elliot.* ” I opened up the backseat door and dropped the full basket behind my driver seat.

She rolled her eyes, opening the door to my car and sliding in with me following suit. “What a reach. I cut my hair short and wear a couple pairs of overalls and suddenly I’m a boy.” Jane buckled in and put her bag on the floor. “Elementary kids are so unoriginal.” She went to put her feet up on the dash but must’ve swiftly remembered whose car she was in and set them on the ground instead.

I watched her carefully the entire time. “Good decision.”

“It’s just the dash.”

With a turn of my keys, the engine sparked alive. “Someone’s car is an extension of their home. Not that you would know.” I threw my arm around the passenger seat and angled my body towards the back of the car to see where I was backing up.

“I’m getting a car soon ya jackass.” She nudged my arm.

While I was still turned towards the back, I saw out of my peripheral vision Jane pull out her phone and get on. Of course she had the screen set onto the highest brightness setting. It looked like she was looking through some pictures, but I averted my eyes. I think we’ve had enough invasions of privacy in the past forty-eight hours to last us awhile.

I turned back around and started towards the complex exit. We were one of the furthest back buildings, right next to where the dorms ended and the wooded area started. I liked it, it made our balcony all the more secluded; just facing a wall of tall trees where most saw duplicate structures.

“Oh really?” I asked. “Jim’s gonna get you a car?” She nodded her head. “When?”

She sighed, putting her phone away. “Probably for my birthday, but we’re not completely sure. Jonathon’s supposed to be getting a new car soon, so someone’s gonna get his Eclipse. Obviously Mom and Dad can’t afford to buy two cars this year, so whoever gets a new car has to pay half of it, and whoever takes Jon’s car just g *ets* a new one once the Eclipse goes out.” Jane turned to me, “does that make sense?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure Lucas’s parents had the same deal for them.” My fingers adjusted on the steering wheel. It was always weird for me to talk about this kind of stuff with my friends. All of us came from such different backgrounds, sometimes it was hard to imagine. Dustin was an only child, Lucas was an older brother, Will and Jane have never had the nicest of things, while I got a brand new car for

free on my sixteenth birthday.

I may have usually had the 'nicer' things out of the group - Dustin being the only other one usually with him being an only child with an overtly loving mother - but I've always envied all of their family dynamics over mine. I love my Mom and sisters, and I know they love me, but we've never been as close as anyone of my friends with their parents or siblings. I text Nance from time to time to ask for her advice on things, but that's usually when Steve isn't available or something.

Say what you will about having money, but there's a reason why I always loved going to the Hopper-Byers household; it was always so full of welcoming energy and love. They may have always lived in a quaint house with quaint things, but it always felt more full than my two story colonial, with it's knick-knacks and nice furniture, ever did.

"Which one do you think you're gonna do?" I asked.

Hopper shrugged, "I'm not sure. Jon's car has like seventy thousand miles on it, so it's probably gonna be a bit rough around the edges. But I love that car, and I don't plan on driving much."

"If your driving is anything like your walking that's probably a good thing."

My eyes were on the road still, but I could feel her frown at me. "Ha Ha, " she said dryly, "comedic gold Wheeler."

The Mat came into sight. Neon signs illuminating the dark landscape around it. There were cars lined all around it...I had *never* seen it so busy. My responsible adult rant seemed as baseless as ever.

"Looks like I'm not the only *irresponsible* college student who stays up past ten huh?" Jane quipped, looking over at me as I parked further away than I ever have before.

A yawn escaped my mouth as I took the keys out of the ignition. I tried to hide it from Hopper, but she definitely saw it, and gave me a wide grin in response.

"Aw is poor Wheeler getting sleepy already? We've got a good couple

hours of being here, are you sure you're up for it old man?" Hopper said as she jumped out of the car, as full of energy as ever.

She was right. Both of us had at least two loads each to clean, and each one took about an hour (at least; not even counting how I usually liked to do an extra rinse cycle), so we were definitely gonna be here for awhile. *Until at least two am* , I groaned internally, *am I really ready for this?*

I watched her walk halfway to the The Mat, then stop. She turned around and waved for me to come in. I mean, this was what I had wanted; some time alone with Jane to talk to her. *Be careful what you wish for* they say. So I got out of my car, grabbed the basket from the backseat, and followed her in.

Jane H. // September 3rd // 1:04 am

Wheeler truly wasn't cut out for this 'late night' life. We've only been here an hour and it felt like I was dragging a dead body around more so than a man. His eyes were red and he kept leaning up against any object he could. I wasn't really letting him fully sit down in fear he'd just pass out right then and there.

"Why don't you get some coffee?" I asked. Folding my towels like Wheeler had just taught me to (which is not by halves but by thirds). Of course his exhaustion didn't keep him from 'correcting' me in whichever way he could.

He was separating the clothes into different groups, something he insisted was 'impertinent' to doing laundry. I thought it was just a waste of time; what's wrong with mixing colors and blacks? I'd ask but I'm pretty sure I'd give him an aneurysm.

"If I drink coffee now I'll be up all night." He yawned again.

The side of my mouth quirked, I felt bad. No matter how mad I've been at Wheeler recently (besides the usually present anger), anyone could see this boy was miserable.

Don't get me wrong, what he did was fucked up. I think invading

someone's privacy is deplorable. Sometimes all we have just to ourselves is our secrets, and no one has a right to impede upon that. I mean, I hadn't even shown Max any of my writings and she's my *best friend* . Will knew I liked to write and read things I wrote when I was younger, but I don't think that counts. The poem Wheeler read and took (that's a whole other thing) was a very personal poem to me. No one eyes had seen that besides me, and I had planned on keeping it that way for - um I don't know - *forever* .

I had planned on not talking to him for awhile, or however long you can not talk to someone you live with. But he made this very obvious attempt at making everything better by driving me tonight, then staying despite him appearing more dead than alive. It reminded me of the sort of things we used to do for each other when we were young. Maybe that was why I was wanting to go easy on him...nostalgia can be a heavy drug.

I sat up on the dryer next to him, trying to get his attention. "You know you can go if you want to. I can finish the rest."

He shook his head, taking a deep breath in and out through his nose (probably to avoid yawning again). "And let you mess up both of our laundry? I think not."

I rolled my eyes. Even with not having slept for seventeen hours, he still managed to be a little shit. "Well if you're gonna stay, you're gonna have some coffee." He tried to say something, but I stood up and shushed him before he could. "This laundry isn't gonna be done for another hour or so, and I'm already losing ya. You look like mighty shit Wheeler."

"Thanks." He said pointedly.

"Anytime." I dug around in my pockets for spare cash I had brought for a situation like this. "Now what do you want to drink?"

Personally, I usually got the Permanent Press (sometimes called the Peppermint Press), which had white chocolate and, obviously, peppermint. It was a nice juxtaposition of tastes; the coolness of the mint encapsulated in a hot drink. Ugh it was to die for.

My fingers were still digging around in my pockets when Wheeler took out his wallet and swiftly handed me a crisp, twenty dollar bill. I was gonna say something, but he just nudged it forward and sighed. “Please just let me pay. I’m too tired to fight.”

I eyed both the bill and him, debating my options. I always preferred to make things difficult for Wheeler, but he wouldn’t be much fun to mess with right now. I bet he wouldn’t fight or tease me at all. So where would the fun be in that?

“Fine.” I said as I snatched the twenty out of his hand.

He put his wallet back into his front pocket. “Ink Stain for me please.”

I hummed as I walked away to get the coffee. The cafe part of The Mat was on the opposite side of the actual machines, in between being the little sitting and arcade area. From its namesake, you’d think that the only people who’d come here would be kids who needed their laundry done. Recently, however, The Mat has become quite the hangout spot for a lot of the kids on campus. It’s probably because it’s the only place open all the time besides bars and breakfast restaurants. So if you’re not old enough to drink and don’t feel like eating breakfast food, this was definitely gonna be your place.

Personally, I just preferred to stay home and binge watch tv shows on Netflix or Hulu (perhaps while enjoying the occasional joint). But I guess everyone has their ‘thing’.

I walked up to the counter and waited for someone. All the guys and girls behind the counter looked pretty stoned themselves most of the time, but honestly they could just be tired too. Staying up this late was one thing, but *working* this late? Sounds like hell.

One of the workers, a guy with longish blonde hair, came up and typed a couple things on the screen in front of him. He nodded at me, signaling me to tell him my order. “Can I just get one Permanent Press and one Ink Stain? Both smalls please.”

He hummed in response, typing away on the system’s screen in front

of him. “That’ll be six dollars and two cents.” I handed him the twenty and watched him count out the cash and coins in front of him. “Thirteen dollars and ninety-eight cents is your change. We’ll have that right out.”

I nodded and walked away, awkwardly sticking my hands in my too-small front pockets (damn you women’s pants). I tripped a bit on my footing, but recovered before I fully fell. Cursing my awkwardness, I checked around me to see if anyone saw that. No one seemed to be paying any attention to me (thank god), so I continued waiting close to the counter. I always managed to make a fool out of myself in public somehow, whether it be because of my clumsiness or general gauche disposition. Hence why alcohol was my best friend in social situations...it was liquid courage and a great excuse as to why I tripped over nothing and broke your lamp.

Well..it also led to me losing my virginity to my sworn enemy, so maybe we’re not as good of friends as I thought we were.

“One Ink Stain and One Permanent Press.” The same guy called out from the opposite side of the counter. I walked up and got my coffee’s, giving him a polite smile and saying “thank you.”

When I had drinks - or anything breakable - in my hand, I always walked with utmost care. Sure, it was really slow and I probably looked a bit weird, but I’ve had my fair share of falls with delicate things in hand. I know better.

I looked to where I had left Wheeler, and I didn’t see him. Our soap and stuff was still on top of the dryers but he wasn’t within sight.

“What the fuck.” I muttered to myself, stuttering in my steps. Then I noticed a pair of dark jean-clad legs next to a big soap dispenser. I knew it was Mike from his matching converse, so I walked over and saw him curled up against the soap dispenser, half awake. “Wheeler,” I said while jabbing him in the leg with my foot.

He groaned in response, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. He looked ten years old again. I held out his coffee towards him. “Ink Stain for an Ink Stain.”

Wheeler didn't respond, just took the coffee and tried to take a drink from it, quickly realizing it was still too hot. In the meantime, I dug out the thirteen or so dollars I had been given back as change and held it out towards him.

"Here's your change."

I sat down next to him after he took the money. "How's the laundry going?"

"Good. I just put in two more loads. Hopefully we'll be done within the next couple hours."

"Three am then?" He nodded. "Not that bad. Some nights I'll be here until the sun comes up."

The first smile I've seen since before we got here came across his face while he shook his head. "You're ridiculous," he said, fiddling with his coffee cup sleeve. I was about to change the subject when he looked up at me, face full of unspoken words. I forgot how expressive he was, or how easy it was to read his face

Wheeler didn't say anything for a minute, so I asked, "what?"

His eyes went back down to his coffee. "I'm sorry for reading your poem...and taking it." Instinctively, I turned my face away from him, looking at the brightly colored tiles all around the floor. I knew The Mat was relatively new but this flooring looked ancient. I took a sip of my coffee. "That was incredibly rude of me and I'm really, truly sorry."

I still didn't meet his eyes. I really hadn't expected him to bring it up again. Most guys wouldn't have. I *wish* he hadn't. "It's whatever Wheeler. Let's just forget about it." My feet pawed at the floor, leaving black streaks. *Let's just add it to the ever growing list of things me and you don't talk about anymore,* I thought to myself.

Wheeler sat up, mirroring my posture. I still avoided eye contact, although I could tell he was leaning down in hopes to catching it. "Can I at least tell you why?"

At first, I was gonna tell him 'no' and stomp off or do something else

within character for myself...but I was curious. I really did wanna know why he felt the need to take one of my poems...specifically *that* one. He's never really taken an interest into how I feel as of late. But I didn't wanna give him the satisfaction, so I just stayed silent. He could take that however he wanted.

He was still leaning forward, still messing with the sleeve. "I just...I could *never* write anything like that." A breathy laugh was let out with his words. "It was....incredible."

I felt a bit of a blush ting my cheeks. My lips pressed together to keep from forming into a smile. I had been worried he was gonna make fun of me for it, or maybe even try to decipher who it was about (the latter being defcon *five* basically). Safe to say this is a hundred times better.

"And...I wanted to ask a favor of you."

My eyebrows knitted together. What kind of favor could he be asking? What did it have to do with my poem? Were those kind words he said just a way to butter me up for this? *What the fuck Wheeler?*

So I turned to him and asked "what?"

His face was close to mine from his position; I could see just how tired his eyes were and the anxiety written all over his features. Whatever it was, he was pretty nervous about it.

I was about to ask him to spit it out already when he finally talked.

"Could you…. *would* you be willing to write songs for my band?"

One of the washing machines dinged in front of us. Both of us flinched and looked away from each other. My mouth gaped open. Didn't see *that one* coming.

Notes for the Chapter:

well....hi

Sorry this thing took me a MONTH to write. School has been kicking my butt and I got a new computer, I've had little to no free time as of late. But don't fret! I'm stilly making this story a priority and will try to update it every couple weeks (hopefully shorter)

If you guys wanna see my update progress you should check out my fic blog: bloodxhoney.tumblr.com. I know I say it a lot but I really do post on there pretty often about my writings; current and upcoming (wink wink). I actually plan on writing lil drabbles about what happened in the car with mike/steve, which I took out cause I didn't think it was too relevant to the plot and obviously I had a lot of other things I needed to put in this chapter. So if you're interested in that I'll probably post it on my blog within the next couple days :3

Leave a kudos if you liked the chapter and tell me what ya think in the comments! What do you think is gonna happen? Is El gonna do it? What did Steve and Mike talk about? Who all is gonna figure out about what happened? So many questions :o

until next time x